ROU BAO BU CHI ROU

Remnants of Filth 7

YUWU

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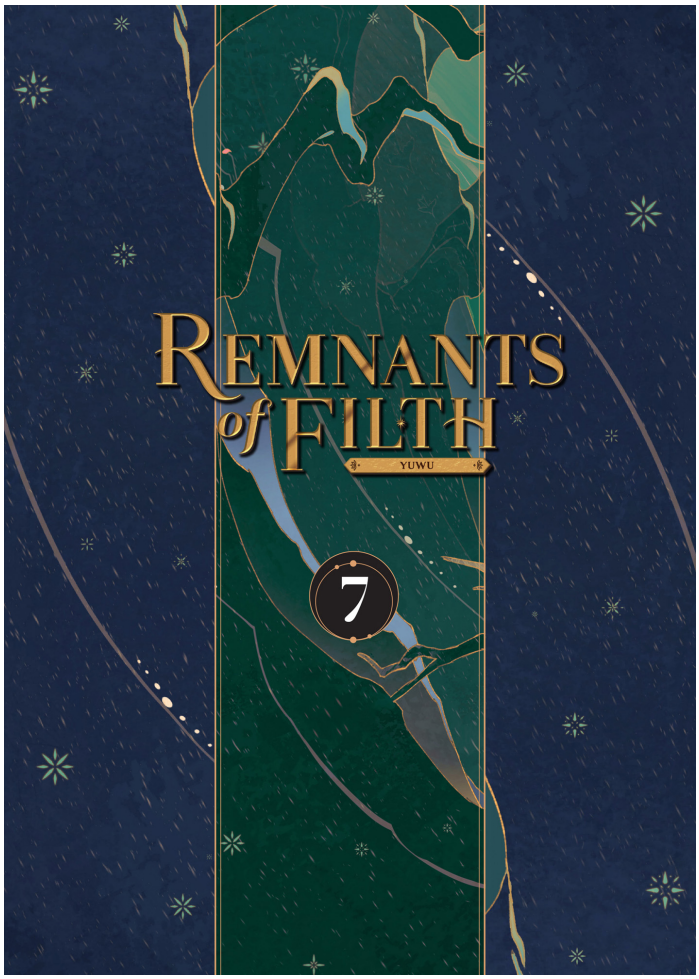
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of FILTH
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Chapter 190:
Before the Flower Broke the Darkness

"THIS CONVOLUTED TALE began when Hua Po'an first learned of his own identity."

Jiang Fuli's voice was brittle as crushed jade as he recounted those events from many centuries past.

Hundreds of years ago, Hua Po'an had been a slave in the academy. Even then, his personality was unyielding, and he refused to bow to the rules. Other slaves accepted their fate from the moment they were born, but when Hua Po'an saw those noble young masters in their splendid coats of brocade and plush furs, he had always silently asked himself: Why wasn't *he* the one to enjoy such luxuries? Why was *he* born into poverty, while others wanted for nothing from the very first breath they drew?

As he grew older, Hua Po'an's wild nature had become harder and harder to tame. He began to cultivate in secret. He discovered he could master in a day techniques those noble children couldn't manage in weeks or months. In time, he discovered the reason behind his extraordinary talent: When Chonghua was founded, his own ancestor had been a step away from becoming emperor. But because his brother schemed against him, he had suffered a grievous defeat and lost everything.

At that moment, Hua Po'an realized with a start that this was what people meant when they said history was written by the victors. If his ancestor hadn't been so soft-hearted, if he had killed his brother first, then wouldn't Hua Po'an be the one living in fathomless glory today? Wouldn't he be someone who trampled carelessly over servants and slaves?

He, Hua Po'an, was not a slave. He had missed the throne by the thinnest of margins.

After learning these truths, Hua Po'an felt no more doubt in his heart when he looked at the noble young masters. He felt only hatred, scorn, and ridicule. He gazed upon those useless aristocrats with the eyes of a falcon,

watching as those middling idiots tried and failed to reach heights he'd cleared with ease. His glory had been stolen from him, and his heart filled with a loathing that flourished like weeds.

But Hua Po'an was a clever man. He understood that rash use of brute force would end with his severed head rolling upon the ground. Even after he learned of his lineage, he feigned ignorance of it, pretending to be helpless and pitiable. He slithered like a snake through the underbrush, peering furtively at the grass rustling in the breeze. He hoped to find a legitimate opportunity to show himself before the emperor. Thus he slowly constructed the stairs that would take him up through the ranks.

The first step he placed his foot upon was the academy's purest and kindest grandmaster—Chen Tang, Preceptor Chen. Hua Po'an made a point of coming before Chen Tang from time to time, leaving the man with the impression that this slave was obedient and sensible. When the right moment arrived, he staged losing control of his spiritual core and managed to secure Chen Tang's compassion through a lie, just as expected.

"I've reported this incident to His Imperial Majesty and made an exception to take you as a disciple," Chen Tang told him gently. "Focus on resting. Once you recover, you may learn from me and move through the academy as you please."

Hua Po'an's first risky move had paid off. Of course that tender-hearted idiot Chen Tang didn't disappoint. From then on, Hua Po'an exploited Chen Tang's compassion, putting on a loveable and docile act by his side. As the days wore on, he successfully placed piece after piece on the chessboard of his ambitions, drawing ever nearer to realizing his goals.

Still, it was not as if he never knew guilt. As he yearned to reach the upper echelons of power, he cultivated with rash abandon. Once, after he fell unconscious from a high fever, he woke to find Chen Tang sitting wearily at the desk, cheek propped on his palm as he slept fitfully, a bowl of medicine ready by his hand. As he'd gazed upon Chen Tang's weary, elegant profile, Hua Po'an's heart had indeed ached. He hadn't failed to notice the things Chen Tang had done for him throughout the years. He noticed how Chen Tang patiently taught him and guided him without a care for other's criticisms. He watched Chen Tang argue that slave-born people

were as innately kind as anyone else, that there was nothing they couldn't be taught. He'd walked beneath Chen Tang's umbrella, eaten the rice porridge Chen Tang cooked him, and used the healing salve Chen Tang gifted him. His shizun had never remotely mistreated him because of his status. He gave him a name—Hua Po'an—signifying that even in the dead of night, a flower could bloom and break the darkness.

Hua Po'an had called him *Shizun* with feigned regard in the beginning. But by the end, his sincerity was real. Unfortunately, Hua Po'an's grudges and ambitions overruled all else. His sincerity changed nothing. He knew Chen Tang's clan was unfailingly loyal to the emperor—in fact, this clan had been foremost among the families who had once overthrown his ancestor.

Was this karmic retribution, or simply reaping what they had sown?

For all his guilt, Hua Po'an stayed his course. He pried into Chen Tang's secret techniques and furtively studied those forbidden black magic arts that everyone despised. He altered every single bright and honorable spell Chen Tang taught him, twisting them into dark and malevolent techniques. He raised an army and rebelled, hoping to overturn the imperial court of Chonghua. He led hundreds of thousands of troops and the Demonblood Beast Jingchen to besiege his motherland.

He marched forth, aglow with excitement and arrogance. He pictured how the nation would fall to its knees when he took the city, how the people would bow down before him, the slave no one had found worthy, and beg pathetically for their lives to be spared. How very satisfying this would be! Would he allow them to live, or doom them to die? Hua Po'an didn't care to think that far ahead. To him, these people were as significant as dead grass left in the fields at the end of autumn; they were beneath his consideration.

There was only one person whose fate he turned over again and again in the depths of his mind, unable to decide how he ought to dispose of him. That person was none other than the first step he'd used in his ascension—his benevolent teacher, Chen Tang. Would he reduce him to a commoner? No no, that would be no fun. Let him continue teaching at the academy? Much too boring. Snap all the tendons in his limbs and throw him in prison?

But why? After all, Chen Tang had shown him nothing but kindness. Hua Po'an had no grudges against him. Why would he lock him up?

And yet whenever that last thought crossed his mind, Hua Po'an felt a strange thrill, one that made him lick his lips as his eyes lit up. He didn't know the meaning of this impulse, but he had a vague inkling that a large part of his satisfaction in conquering Chonghua would come from the power he would wield over Preceptor Chen. He could control him, punish him, defile him…

His pupils contracted slightly, joy shining from his bold and youthful face.

Hua Po'an had plotted out the conclusion to this game of chess thousands of times, but never once had he anticipated that Chen Tang would die. Yet as Hua Po'an looked on, Chen Tang had raised his hands—the same hands that had once wiped Hua Po'an's fevered brow—and snuffed out the life of his cherished Demonblood Beast. With the same eyes that had once gazed warmly at him, Chen Tang fixed him with a cold stare. In that voice that had once patiently explained a difficult spell, Chen Tang spoke with a sharp viciousness: "It's over. Hua Po'an, your ambition ends here."

He was a schemer filled with wild ambition. He'd never put much stock in sentiment. But after Chen Tang's death, his sanity frayed, and his appetites grew increasingly depraved. It was fortunate that when Chen Tang sacrificed himself to kill the Demonblood Beast, he did not utter the words *I regret ever taking you on as a disciple*. Perhaps he had no opportunity before death claimed him—but it was a great stroke of luck nevertheless. Hua Po'an might have gone even more insane otherwise; he was already crazy enough.

Chen Tang perished, the Demonblood Beast was sealed, and the Liao Kingdom's army was defeated. Everyone knew the conclusion to that great battle. What they did not know was that, after Hua Po'an retreated with his troops to Liao, hatred and discontent roiled in his chest, joined by an anguish he was unwilling to acknowledge. In this state of turmoil, he gathered all the soul-summoning methods in the Nine Provinces and summoned a fragment of Chen Tang's departed soul.

He was seized by a frantic need to ask Chen Tang a question: Why did he go to such lengths? Wasn't every emperor more or less the same?! Why couldn't *he*, Hua Po'an, sit upon that throne? Even if he'd killed everyone upon taking the city, he would have spared Chen Tang—

Why was it Chen Tang who had to die? The singular person he wanted to keep alive had perished with the demon beast to save the same useless masses Hua Po'an wished to cut down like weeds.

Over and over again, using all sorts of spells, he attempted to piece together the remaining scraps of Chen Tang's soul. With each failure, the hatred in his heart festered by degrees. Chen Tang was indeed a lapdog of Chonghua's emperor, Hua Po'an thought—he had foiled Hua Po'an's revolt, and now he wanted to destroy his heart as well. Tormenting him like this was his retaliation, was it not?

Still Hua Po'an was undeterred. No one could turn him from his course.

Finally, there came a day when he captured one of Chen Tang's cousins. Using this blood connection, he succeeded with a soul-summoning method that had previously failed. Hua Po'an triumphantly poured Chen Tang's soul into that living body and revived Preceptor Chen.

Deep within the Liao palace, within a golden bed canopy, countless thoughts had surged through Hua Po'an's mind as he faced the man he'd lost and regained, his teacher who had died and been resurrected. But what he did was something even he himself hadn't expected.

He plundered Chen Tang's newly awakened body.

It seemed a cruel joke—had he gone to such pains to bring a dead man back to life solely for the pleasure he could get off his body? Yet that night, he devoured without restraint the man he'd snatched back from the depths of the underworld, like a traveler dying of thirst drinking from a sweet spring.

When the exhausted Preceptor Chen passed out, Hua Po'an held him, gazing at the pale tears of humiliation that had gathered in the corners of his eyes. *Forget it*, he thought—he no longer wanted to ask. He no longer wanted to ask Chen Tang why he had sacrificed himself with the

Demonblood Beast, why he had died for the sake of his country. None of it mattered anymore; it was all in the past. At that moment, Hua Po'an felt a profound sense of peace. As though he'd always yearned to have Chen Tang like this, and had finally awoken to his desire today.

At last, he was satisfied. But he was the only one who felt satisfaction. Chen Tang, whom he'd hauled out of death, lived in horrific agony, facing the consequences of his own actions every single day. He was a once-powerful man, yet he had no choice but to lie beneath his own disciple in submission. He was trapped in a cage, and the people in the world who knew he was still alive could be counted on a single hand.

His greatest source of terror was the fact that he had no idea when these days would end. After Hua Po'an resurrected him, he lost interest in conquering more lands and fervently turned his attention to the arts of immortality, as if he wished to keep living like this for centuries.

Hua Po'an would not give him a chance to die again. In all absurdity, having experienced Chen Tang's previous death, Hua Po'an's mad whims only grew madder. He believed Chen Tang chose to die with the Demonblood Beast because he cared too much for the lives of those irrelevant people. Chen Tang, he thought, should never care for others ever again—to this end, he devised all sorts of ghastly methods to sunder what connections Chen Tang retained with the outside world, one after another. He concocted medicines that made him forget his family and devised poisonous curses that excised all his fond feelings; there was nothing he wouldn't put to use. When he discovered a dark art that could sever Chen Tang's fated connections in every cycle of reincarnation to come, he gleefully cast the curse—no more would his teacher form bonds of marriage, family, or friendship.

Only after Hua Po'an had ensured Chen Tang would live beneath a lonely star forevermore did he feel at ease. Only then could he be certain Chen Tang wouldn't ever sacrifice his life for someone else again.

But perhaps because a trace of Chen Tang's innate goodness still remained, or because he so stubbornly refused to surrender, the Liao Kingdom's high priestess, who was in charge of his care in the palace, fell for him in tender-hearted love.

This priestess was none other than Su Yurou. Throughout the years, she saw Chen Tang struggling as he tried to resist Hua Po'an's malevolent spells, saw him subjected to suffering that defied the will of heaven, saw him forced to live a life worse than death. She admired his strength, but increasingly struggled to witness his plight in silence. One day, she decided to act. While Hua Po'an was away on a long campaign in the northwest, she took Chen Tang and fled the palace. After fighting their way through myriad dangers and obstacles, the two of them finally escaped the borders of the Liao Kingdom.

Her aid wasn't purely selfless: She had fallen in love with Chen Tang and intended to marry him. But Chen Tang's fated bonds had been irreversibly severed by Hua Po'an; all of Su Yurou's efforts and sincerity were in vain. And more critically, the torture and dark spells Chen Tang had been subjected to at Hua Po'an's hands continued to scramble his memories and deepen his pain.

Su Yurou couldn't bear to see him suffer so grievously. She therefore made a decision. Before she'd fled the palace, Su Yurou had stolen one of the most precious treasures of the Liao Kingdom: an ancient heirloom Hua Po'an had taken from the Chen Clan, the holy artifact called the Reversal Stone. It had long been said this stone was capable of changing the past, but Chen Tang's clan had only guarded it, never putting it to use. Hua Po'an had tried to pry its secrets from Chen Tang's lips to no avail.

Regardless, immense power resided within this stone—enough, Su Yurou believed, to alter the course of fate. She created an array with the stone in its center, casting a spell that sealed away all of Chen Tang's memories and curses, thus giving him a new life. Preceptor Chen disappeared, and the man who rose from the sickbed was Jiang Fuli.

Spells cast with the Reversal Stone carried a heavy price—the backlash devoured half of Su Yurou's lovely face. One half retained its peerless beauty, while the other became warped and demonic. She had no choice but to hide her face behind a veil from then on. When she had finished, she secretly embedded the Reversal Stone in Jiang Fuli's left eye. The stone had a unique property: It absorbed spiritual energy from the surrounding world each night and entered a temporary resting state. This

was the reason Jiang Fuli couldn’t see clearly through his left eye after nightfall.

Su Yurou and Jiang Fuli continued to travel as a pair. Gradually, Su Yurou discovered the terrifying depth of the mark Hua Po’an had left on Chen Tang’s mind. Jiang Fuli barely remembered anything from before the Reversal Stone’s spell, but every so often he’d ask without warning, “Did I once have a loveable and clever little disciple?”

One balmy afternoon, when the peach blossoms were first beginning to bloom, Jiang Fuli sat by the window and silently copied out a sword manual. “What are you working on?” Su Yurou asked curiously.

Jiang Fuli was placid and mostly affectless: such was his usual demeanor after being sealed by the Reversal Stone. He often reminded her of a walking corpse, yet this was the only way he could live in relative ease, rather than being trapped in sleepless agony. “I don’t know either,” he said. “This just came to mind, so I scribbled it down. They look like decent sword forms.”

A closer look left her speechless—it was the *Water-Parting Sword Manual.* These were the sword forms Hua Po’an had most favored when he practiced in the Liao palace. *A sword of five years turns the seasons, a sword of ten years turns back time. This sword’s edge sharp enough to part the waters, this life too short to part my heart from yours*. This Water-Parting Sword was the first set of sword forms Chen Tang had taught Hua Po’an after taking him as a student. Chen Tang had reportedly developed them specifically for Hua Po’an’s martial strengths and weaknesses. Whenever Hua Po’an had spoken of this, his face had become suffused with crazed glee, though sorrow still lurked in the shadows.

Hua Po’an had later learned countless formidable sword techniques; the Water-Parting Sword was by no means the strongest. Chen Tang, too, had developed many excellent techniques in his life; the Water-Parting Sword was hardly his most noteworthy creation.

And yet, despite having lost all of his memories, Jiang Fuli still had the ability to serenely write out each of the sword forms. As Su Yurou watched his brush move across the paper, she didn’t know what to feel.

Jiang Fuli looked up. “What is it? Do you know the origins of this sword manual?”

She lowered her lashes in panic. “No. I—I don’t know either…”

The two of them hid in the depths of a nameless forest in the mountains for many years. In the palace of Liao, Hua Po’an had studied the forbidden techniques of immortality and dosed both Jiang Fuli and Su Yurou with those arcane medicines. In order to let Jiang Fuli rest and recover, and because she was afraid of Hua Po’an chasing them down, Su Yurou concealed them within a barrier. As the years slipped by, she lost track of events in the outside world. By the time she felt it was time to venture out of the mountains and speak to others, centuries had passed.

She realized with some astonishment that Hua Po’an’s secret forays into immortality had actually succeeded. Upon asking about the state of each country, she learned that many small nations had fallen and been replaced, and that Chonghua had seen several generations of rulers. As for the Liao Kingdom, its ruler Hua Po’an had been too hasty in seeking immortality and conducted black magic experiments on a large scale, making many enemies. In the end, his work backfired: He died of spell backlash after he was attacked by assassins. The Liao Kingdom had since had quite a few different rulers, but their king was a puppet. The real monarch was the guoshi of the Liao Kingdom who hid in the shadows.

When Su Yurou learned of this, she couldn’t help sighing in relief. She and Jiang Fuli could finally return to the mortal world without worrying that Hua Po’an would find them. Still, she felt a faint trepidation. The tales of that mysterious guoshi stirred in her a vague sense of familiarity and foreboding.

A few years later, she found evidence for her unease. She and Jiang Fuli had been in seclusion for hundreds of years, cultivating healing arts in the remote mountains. Upon re-entering civilization, the two of them roamed across the realm, familiarizing themselves with the world at present while saving many innocent commoners caught in the fires of war.

On one occasion, they passed through a little village in Lichun, where they came upon a massacre committed by Liao Kingdom cultivators. There,

Jiang Fuli rescued two orphans from certain death; the older one had clutched at his younger brother, begging the masked Jiang Fuli to take them in.

Jiang Fuli's memories and emotions were sealed away. Nothing should've shaken him. But as he stared at the young boy kneeling before him that day, he did something Su Yurou never expected. He produced that handwritten *Water-Parting Sword Manual* and gave it to that youth.

"There's not much point in me keeping this sword manual; its techniques are too weak. But if you learn it well, you might be able to use it as the foundation for some of your own sword methods. It'll be enough to keep yourself safe."

After they returned, Su Yurou asked him why he'd done it.

"I don't know," Jiang Fuli had said, absent-mindedly grinding medicine. "The way he looked when he knelt and begged me for help seemed familiar somehow."

Su Yurou felt a twinge of alarm. *Yes—someone once knelt before you just like this. Hundreds of years ago, in the academy of Chonghua. A young slave with ravenous ambition knelt pathetically before you and begged you to save him, and you spared his life.*

Su Yurou said none of this out loud, but she raised her eyes to the hazy gray of the sky. It was the rainy season; faint flashes of lightning brandished their claws behind the dark clouds. It was about to storm again.

The Liao Kingdom's murderous pursuit found them without warning a few years after Jiang Fuli gave away the *Water-Parting Sword Manual*. Su Yurou and Jiang Fuli fled in panic, managing to escape several attempts at capture by the skin of their teeth. After the most dangerous attack yet, Su Yurou knew they could no longer wander as they pleased in these small countries. They had to take shelter in a nation that was sufficiently powerful. She brought Jiang Fuli back to Chonghua.

In the centuries since they had last known it, Chonghua had undergone tremendous change. No one realized Jiang Fuli's identity, and Jiang Fuli himself likewise remained in the dark. Although they appeared to settle down, Su Yurou was still troubled by the Liao Kingdom's interest in

them. Again and again, she felt Hua Po'an's predatory gaze trained on her back—but how could that be? Hua Po'an was dead. Even if he wasn't, why had he suddenly decided to target the undercover Jiang Fuli?

Intuition made her wary. To test her suspicions, and also to allow them to properly establish their residence in Chonghua, she and Jiang Fuli held a flamboyant wedding a few months later. In all honesty, it was just for show. Jiang Fuli's emotions had been erased and his desires eliminated. His fated bonds had been severed—any marriage would be one in name only.

Nevertheless, the news spread. On the day of the wedding feast, Su Yurou purposefully revealed the unmarred half of her face, showing off her ethereal looks and the teardrop-shaped mole by her eye. She waited for the Liao Kingdom's reaction.

The outcome was more terrifying than she could have imagined. The guoshi of the Liao Kingdom suddenly began seeking women who looked like Su Yurou. He invited them to the palace to become priestesses, only to dress them all up as brides and slaughter them. Unfortunately, the youth to whom Jiang Fuli had gifted the sword manual was drawn in as well. In the end, he was refined into a sword spirit and returned to Chonghua to make trouble.

It was all so unthinkable.

The tale that spread made sense to outsiders: The guoshi of the Liao Kingdom had once loved a peerlessly beautiful priestess. He held a venomous grudge over her betrayal, and so married countless women who resembled her and had them slaughtered as proof of his scorn. Even the sword spirit Li Qingqian believed this was the truth. The priestess was thought to be a calamitous beauty, possessed of such exquisite features that she drove the guoshi to madness.

Only Su Yurou herself knew it wasn't so. Hua Po'an, she realized, had never died. Perhaps he had been severely wounded in the attack all those years ago and had staged his death to avoid those who would seek revenge upon him. Perhaps he had been hiding in the Liao palace all these years under the guise of the guoshi, puppeteering the rulers of the Liao Kingdom for centuries. It was the *Water-Parting Sword Manual* Jiang Fuli

had given to Li Qingqian that had revealed his identity. Li Qingqian had trained for years to manage a few of the forms outlined in its pages. Hua Po'an, who had never given up looking for Chen Tang, took notice. He had methodically followed the clues and planted a target on Jiang Fuli.

On the day the sword demon went berserk, when Su Yurou had walked toward him and brought his obsession crashing down with a single look at her unveiled face and a few spoken words, it was because she knew he had misunderstood. Li Qingqian had believed his beloved Hong Shao was killed because she looked like the woman the guoshi loved, but this was far from the truth. The true source of the guoshi's fury was his belief that Chen Tang's curse had been broken over the centuries, so that he could finally get married and form ties of affection with someone else. The guoshi believed that Su Yurou, as a beautiful woman who had accompanied Chen Tang for hundreds of years, had finally won his heart. The guoshi's massacre of the brides on Maiden's Lament Mountain wasn't an attempt to gather reflections of his lover from all over the realm. Instead, he was arrogantly sending Chen Tang a warning: *Look, the woman you married is nothing special; I can have as many of her as I'd like. You like her type? I'll take all of them into my hands and crush them underfoot. The woman you love, and those bitches who resemble her, will die horrible deaths. I can't break all of your predestined bonds, so this will be the curse I place on you.*

The face Su Yurou showed Li Qingqian was not one of breathtaking beauty. Only half of her loveliness remained, while the other half resembled a ghoul's horrifying features. She told him, *Li Qingqian, the man who saved you back in Lichun is the real object of the Liao Kingdom guoshi's long-standing obsession. You've misunderstood; it was never me. The reason the guoshi went crazy is because of the man who once gave you the* Water-Parting Sword Manual—*Jiang Fuli.*

The events of the past had been fully recounted.

The side room where Jiang Fuli had brought Mo Xi was dead silent. Mo Xi sat, pale-faced, and gazed at the man across the table—the man who had recovered his memories via the power of a sacred tree, the man whose seal on his own emotions had been lifted—and had no idea what to say.

He understood the predicament Jiang Fuli found himself in. Who exactly was Medicine Master Jiang? A living person? A puppet? He was in some ways Chen Tang from centuries ago, but he wasn't that man entirely. He'd lived as Jiang Fuli for such a great length of time, but he'd been always alone, devoid of desires or passion. Hundreds of years had passed in the blink of an eye, yet he'd lived without enjoyment or meaning—until now.

Jiang Fuli stroked the Reversal Stone. "Using this, Yurou sealed off my emotions and desires, as well as all my memories," he said mildly. "Having now removed it of my own volition, I bestow upon you this spiritual stone that generations of Chen Tang's family have guarded. According to the hexagram[1] I divined by the sacred tree, the only way to bring this all to an end is for you to activate it yourself. Xihe-jun, I am willing to face Hua Po'an in one last duel. He is Chen Tang's disciple, and I ought to be his executioner. But the expansion of the Demonblood Beast's blood pool is not something I can stop. Only the Reversal Stone has that power."

He picked up the black crystal, its inky darkness setting off the paleness of his fingers. "This spiritual stone is the only one of its kind in all the Nine Provinces. It was one of the energy stones Fuxi used when creating the three forbidden techniques, handed down from primordial times. Once activated, it can open a rift in space-time, allowing the bearer to return to the past."

Mo Xi's face was ashen. "You're talking about the Space-Time Gate of Life and Death."

"No," replied Jiang Fuli. "The Reversal Stone comes from the realm of the gods; it's a spiritual stone Fuxi brought to earth. It long precedes the Space-Time Gate, and isn't as strong as that forbidden technique. It can return you ten years in the past at most, and no further. If the records are to be believed, any spellcaster who attempts the Space-Time Gate is doomed to a tragic demise, and its working places the mortal world in jeopardy of utter annihilation. But the Reversal Stone is different."

"How is it different?"

“There is no curse associated with it. Most of the records describing its use have been muddled by the passage of time. The old writings of Chen Tang’s clan report that it can ‘reflect the soul and spirit, and see into one’s heart,’ and that it ‘inflicts no harm upon the world, as fate has already been written.’ But no one is sure of the exact meaning of these words. The people of Chen Tang’s family only knew it cannot be used at will; one must ask the heavens and divine a hexagram before it can be handed to someone for their use. Otherwise, the consequences might be even more devastating than the Space-Time Gate of Life and Death.”

The candles in the room flickered silently; a moth threw itself into the lamp and exploded with a crackle. Mo Xi gazed into the crystal.

Jiang Fuli pushed the stone toward him. “The hexagram said to give this to you. Activate it and return to the day Gu Mang was sent back to Chonghua as a gift of peace—back to the Fushui riverbank, before Murong Lian met with him.”

Mo Xi’s heart began to race, blood thundering in his ears. The Liao Kingdom hadn’t taken all Gu Mang’s memories. It was Murong Lian who had ruined Gu Mang’s mind, on orders from the emperor, when he’d come to take the soul-box Gu Mang forged to contain the power of the Demonblood Beast. Which was to say, if he returned to that day, before Murong Lian arrived, he could—

His head jerked up. He met Jiang Fuli’s eyes.

Jiang Fuli nodded. “If you destroy the source of the Demonblood Beast’s energy in the past, there’ll be no chance that the Demonblood Beast can be reborn in the present. If all things go well, it could change the fates of many—you might have the chance to preserve Gu Mang’s mind and immediately exonerate him. Maybe Murong Chuyi wouldn’t need to die, and Hua Po’an wouldn’t be able to re-awaken his loyal servant…” Jiang Fuli hesitated. “I cannot guarantee that the changes will all be for the better. The Reversal Stone’s effects don’t last very long—no more than two hours. Upon your return, the situation will have changed entirely. Only you, the stone’s wielder, will remember the past as it was.

“As for everyone else…you will witness a different future for them. You might return to find Yue Chenqing with a completely altered temperament, or you find that Murong Chen came to his senses and wasn’t forced to abdicate. Maybe he will still be ruler of this nation. You might discover that I’ve become completely different. The change you work in the past may create an entirely different Chonghua. But Xihe-jun…”

Jiang Fuli looked out the window and into the distance, where blood was swallowing the earth and the sky had been clouded by smoke. “Perhaps no other conclusion could be worse than the present. Since the sacred tree has divined it, we shall take the risk. You will use the Reversal Stone to return to the past. At the same time, I’ll go to the Liao Kingdom encampment to look for Hua Po’an and keep him from trying to stop you.”

He produced an exquisitely crafted little brocade sachet and placed the Reversal Stone within it, fastening it to Mo Xi’s belt. “There’s only one stone. We have just this one chance, and no precedent to guide us. Let me know when you are ready to begin.”

Jiang Fuli cast a glance at Mo Xi with his remaining eye, but Mo Xi was lost in thought, gazing at the roiling expanse of scarlet outside. His Chonghua, his beloved, their youth, their family, their home—they might all be granted a chance to start over.

“There’s also a possibility that you may die in the attempt,” Jiang Fuli said at last. “No one knows.”

Mo Xi glanced at the blood pool in which Gu Mang lost his life, then brought his gaze back to Jiang Fuli. “I’m ready.”

The copper bells outside the window chimed in the breeze. They were staking everything on this final gamble before the coming dawn. Only by taking the correct steps would Chonghua survive to welcome daybreak.

At this point, what did it matter if he lived or died? Mo Xi was completely alone. There was no one he couldn’t bear to leave.

He gazed into Jiang Fuli’s remaining eye. Hundreds of years ago, eyes like this had gazed tenderly at the young Hua Po’an, beginning an epochal nightmare. Eyes like this had later stared coldly at Hua Po’an, their owner forfeiting his own life to bring a temporary end to a horrid dream.

Now, it was time for this history to be settled forever.

“Are you ready?” asked Jiang Fuli.

“Yes.”

“What you find may be…extremely brutal. Can you handle it?”

Light flashed before Mo Xi’s eyes. In that bright halo, Gu Mang was wearing a scarlet cape, as if his armor was wreathed in flames. He turned back and smiled at Mo Xi. The sight of those pitch-black eyes was something Mo Xi had scarcely dared to dream of in the past few years.

“I can.” Mo Xi took a breath. “Medicine Master Jiang, please begin the spell.”

The worst possible outcome would be his own death. This was Mo Xi’s last thought before he entered the Reversal Stone.

Chapter 191:
Return to Yesteryear

DEEP IN THE NIGHT, three years prior on the banks of the Fushui River, Mo Xi stood panting upon the desolate riverbank. Jiang Fuli's spell had left him dizzy, clutching the Reversal Stone in his sweat-slicked palms. He closed his eyes, turning his face to the cool wind.

This was where the Fushui River wound closest to the capital. From here, one could see the city walls of Chonghua in the distance, grave and imposing, their vast shape faintly flickering in the night. The present war had yet to come. At this very moment, the emperor was instructing Murong Lian to come in secret to the Fushui and destroy Gu Mang's memories. Murong Chuyi was still alive—perhaps he was currently puttering over his diagrams in his artificing workshop.

As for Mo Xi himself…at this time, he would be at the northern frontier, heart full of hatred at Gu Mang's betrayal. He hadn't even wanted to return and see Gu Mang for himself.

Pain lanced through his heart, but he had no time for self-pity. He had at most two hours to destroy the soul-box that contained the Demonblood Beast's power. Only then could he change their future.

Mo Xi had no difficulty finding the imperial guards charged with escorting Gu Mang back to the city. Mo Xi knew Chonghua's marching patterns and the layouts of its encampments like the back of his own hand. Defenses that looked impenetrable barely slowed his steps.

He quickly found the central tent where Gu Mang was held prisoner. Casting a spell to separate the tent from the outside world, Mo Xi walked over to the prison barrier set around Gu Mang and looked at him through the stripes of light like the bars of a cage. The rims of Mo Xi's eyes reddened at the sight of him. This Gu-shixiong resembled an injured wolf, covered in blood as he lay curled within the prison barrier. He wore prisoner's clothes, and his disheveled hair fell around him as he slept on the dirty felt mat.

Mo Xi slipped into the tent, unnoticed by the guards. Yet perhaps Gu Mang wasn't sleeping very deeply, or else had some unfathomable sixth sense—somehow, he woke up. His eyes fluttered open, and he scrambled upright. Moonlight spilled through the opening at the top of the tent, and he sat up within its silvery radiance. When he saw the face of the man who had come, his eyes widened in shock. "Mo Xi?"

Two quiet syllables, yet they felt like a boulder landing in Mo Xi's heart. It hurt so much he couldn't breathe.

"…What are you doing here?"

Mo Xi brushed away the barrier's light, passing through the cage forged from spellcraft, and walked into that beam of moonlight. He looked down, gazing at the prisoner half-kneeling on the mat.

He wanted so badly to tell Gu Mang on behalf of his past self, the Mo Xi who hadn't come: *I'm sorry—I was the one who missed this chance with you*. He wanted to take him away, to set him free. That way, Gu Mang wouldn't have to endure two years of abuse at Luomei Pavilion, three years of suffering with his name besmirched. He wanted to kneel, to embrace that bloody Gu-shixiong in the moonlight. He wanted to tell him, *Enough, you've already done too much. It was my fault; I hated you and loathed you, and didn't return from the northern frontier to see you. I was the only person left you could trust, but…but I stayed away back then and missed the chance to make everything right.*

But he couldn't say it. He had two hours and one chance—a chance to rewrite their destiny.

Mo Xi closed his eyes, swallowing hard around the bitterness that flooded his throat. He knew what he should do—what he had to do—to quickly and successfully obtain that soul-box. He had to take Murong Lian's place, do what Murong Lian should have done on this night, and obtain the box that held the Demonblood Beast's power.

He suppressed the tremor in his voice and buried his emotions within the depths of his eyes. With feigned composure, he told Gu Mang: "It was His Imperial Majesty who sent me."

Gu Mang's blue eyes flashed, then dimmed.

Mo Xi felt his heart had been cleaved apart by a knife dipped in salt; his chest was a mess of blood and gore. He went on, his voice hoarse. He said the words that should have belonged to Murong Lian. “Gu Mang, you’re a traitorous turncoat.”

Gu Mang watched him through clear blue eyes, gazing up at the man who’d once been his inseparable companion, and said not a word.

“His Imperial Majesty told me you wrote to him and said you used your soul to seal the power of the Demonblood Beast. You created a soul-box, hoping to offer it to him in exchange for your life… I’ve come to take this box.”

Each word he pushed out seemed to shred his soul a little more. After the last, Mo Xi was momentarily incapable of going on. He lowered his gaze in silence; he couldn’t stand the way Gu Mang was looking at him. His voice was so hoarse it was barely decipherable. “Hand me the soul-box. I will report this mission completed upon my return.”

The interior of the prison tent was terrifyingly silent; the only sounds were the wailing of the wind outside and the footsteps of the soldiers pacing back and forth on their watch.

Gu Mang still didn’t hand over the soul-box. “Mo-shidi…” he said. “I…didn’t expect you to be the one. I thought you wouldn’t be willing to see me. I thought you’d remain at the northern frontier. I didn’t think you…”

He lapsed into silence, but his words were like sharp needles piercing Mo Xi’s heart. It took all of Mo Xi’s willpower to stop himself from breaking down then.

Gu Mang sighed. “Never mind. At this point, I no longer want to dispute whatever His Imperial Majesty said. He’s right, I *am* a traitorous turncoat. But Mo-shidi.” He gave him a small smile. “If Shige asked you for one last favor—on behalf of our ten years together—what would you say?”

Mo Xi knew what Gu Mang would ask of him, but it didn’t lessen the agonizing heartbreak. After a few beats of silence, he asked, “What would you have me do?”

“I can’t tell you much,” Gu Mang said softly. “Some secrets are safest in my heart alone. If a second person were to know them, it would only put them in greater danger… Mo Xi, the emperor is the ultimate arbiter. Even if I’ve done many things to disappoint you, I still want to warn you to leave yourself a way out. His Imperial Majesty isn’t as trustworthy as he seems.”

When he saw that Mo Xi didn’t deny it, Gu Mang lowered his head, silently reciting an incantation. The box Murong Chen later sealed and hid near the Golden Terrace appeared in Gu Mang’s palm. “This is the soul-box His Imperial Majesty asked you to retrieve.”

According to Murong Lian’s tale, Gu Mang would next tell him that this soul-box could be given to His Imperial Majesty, but a key was necessary to open it. Gu Mang would give Mo Xi the key and tell him to take good care of it, and to destroy it when the time came.

Mo Xi waited for Gu Mang to speak. Once Gu Mang asked this of him and he agreed to it, Mo Xi could put an end to this nightmare. He would go outside and find a place to destroy the box, and there would be a completely different ending for them all.

He waited, and Gu Mang finally spoke. “Tonight, right now, I would ask you to strip out one of my souls,” he said, “and forge it into a key to reinforce the box.”

Mo Xi looked up in disbelief. “What?!”

Gu Mang looked steadily back at him. “I ask you to strip out one of my souls and forge it into a key to reinforce the soul-box.”

Mo Xi took a step backward. What…what was happening? Why were things turning out like this? What was Gu Mang *saying*?

In the pristine light of the moon, Gu Mang smiled faintly. He rose from the ground. Manacles encircled his pale ankles, and his neck and wrists were chained. His long hair, inky and dark, was loose, those lake-blue eyes calmly meeting Mo Xi’s own. “Mo Xi.” Gu Mang sighed. “I think I know where you’ve come from. When you came in, I thought you’d come from the northern frontier. But I couldn’t be sure… And then I saw how shocked you were just now. That’s when I knew—you’re not the Mo Xi

who rushed here from the northern frontier, but the General Mo who's come from the future."

Mo Xi's eyes flew wide, a tempestuous sea surging within them. "How…how could you…"

The chains around Gu Mang's ankles clanked. That thin, pale-faced prisoner stepped up to Mo Xi and raised his eyes, examining Mo Xi's face. "How could I know? When you look at me, there's no hatred in your eyes. Only sadness. So you're the little shidi who figured out some way to come back after I chose to sacrifice myself, right?"

The pain of it hit Mo Xi in the softest, most sensitive piece of his heart. He turned away, but his tears could no longer be restrained, streaming down his face in his shock. "How could you…" Sobs crowded out the rest.

"Dummy, don't cry. It's my fault. I've known for ages that such a day would come." Gu Mang reached out his fettered hands, gently cupping Mo Xi's face. "Mo Xi, I was the one who let you down. All my days I've wanted to bring you into my life, but I've known for a long time when I would choose to die, when my soul would shatter. I couldn't bear to take you with me."

Mo Xi turned, his gaze burning yet sheened with tears. "How could you know that? You're simply…you're simply…"

You're simply a specter from the past! I came back so that I could change this ending.

"Because when I shared minds and merged souls with the Demonblood Beast"—Gu Mang pointed to his own blue eyes—"I fell gravely ill for seven days, never once waking. The demon beast has the ability to foresee its own death. When I merged with it, I saw my future sacrifice. I dreamed other prophetic dreams, and I dreamed of today—I saw you, coming from the future with the Reversal Stone, believing you could change it all. But nothing can actually be changed."

"Impossible!" Mo Xi cried.

Gu Mang shook his head. "Mo Xi, the Reversal Stone has no power to change destiny. That's what the ancient records meant when they said it

‘inflicts no harm upon the world, as fate has already been written.’ There’s no way to easily change the past. The three forbidden techniques are forbidden because if such changes were truly effected, the consequence might be the collapse of the mortal world. This Reversal Stone is said to possess the power to change the lives and deaths of so many mortals, with no price paid—how can this be?”

His words were like cold ice filling up Mo Xi’s insides; even Mo Xi’s fingertips were trembling. “*How*—”

“Before you came, I thought maybe my dream was wrong,” said Gu Mang. “But now I see it wasn’t wrong at all.”

Mo Xi looked up, light flickering madly in his eyes—deeply sorrowful, yet wild and nearly insane. “Then why would Jiang Fuli hand the stone to me? He has Chen Tang’s memories—did he not know how the stone should be used?”

“Mo Xi, Medicine Master Jiang must have known precisely what the result would be when he gave you the Reversal Stone. But if he told you the truth—if he told you to take this stone and return to the past in order to personally cut out my soul and forge it into a key—would you have agreed?”

No, Mo Xi reflected. He would never have done it; there was no way he would’ve agreed.

Gu Mang smiled, an expression filled with sorrow. “The Reversal Stone’s true name is the Stone of Destiny. When the world was created, destiny was written, and the laws of the universe and karmic balance came to be. But that act of creation was too monumental—and even the gods can make mistakes. Thus, they left several such stones on earth. These stones will transport their bearer to the past, supposedly allowing them to change the future. But in reality, that’s a lie. Those who use them to return to the past merely complete tasks that, according to fate, they should have done at the time, but didn’t. You are no exception—Mo Xi, you came from the future thinking to change the past. But your fate is already written by the heavens—you’ll inevitably complete the task entrusted to you by Jiang Fuli

and use my soul to forge a key. That is the destiny this stone seeks to mend."

Mo Xi's blood felt like ice in his veins. His lips trembled; he wanted to say, *You're wrong. It's not supposed to be like this. You're the one who doesn't understand the Reversal Stone; it's not Jiang Fuli who lied to me.*

But as he gazed into Gu Mang's eyes, he knew in the depths of his heart that what he said was all true. Indeed… If a stone could really change the world and reverse the order of the universe, why would it require divination and the guidance of a hexagram? Why would the stone only be handed over to a fated person to return to an equally fated time?

The stone couldn't rewrite destiny at all. It could only mend a past error within a certain loop of time.

Mo Xi couldn't speak. The weight of his emotions was too much. He'd strained beneath them until he could bear it no longer; grief crashed down upon him. "When you returned to the city missing two mortal souls, with your mind broken…I always thought the people who hurt you were from the Liao Kingdom, that *they* had gouged out your souls…but in truth…in truth…"

He wept plaintively, like an abandoned dog, raising scarlet eyes to stare at Gu Mang. He threw his head back and laughed, a mad, hysterical sound. "But in truth, it was me?"

Gu Mang closed his eyes.

"*This* is my fate? Tonight, Murong Lian will come looking for you. In my time, he told me he found you covered in blood and on the verge of death—he thought your interrogators went too far with their torture. But that's not true! I did it myself—before he came, I had gouged out your soul! I completed the fate this stone gave to us! Isn't that right?!"

"Mo Xi…"

"What do you all take me for? What do the heavens take me for? You can see the future; you've dreamed prophetic dreams—did you ever dream of how I felt when you died with the demonic beast and left me? I couldn't cry, couldn't lose my composure, couldn't mourn—*I couldn't even recover*

your body!” Voice breaking, Mo Xi took hold of Gu Mang’s hand and pressed it to his chest. “Gu Mang! I’m a living person, too… Did you foresee what this would do to me…?”

Mo Xi lowered his head, his tears falling like rain.

For as long as Gu Mang had known him, his little shidi had never cried so piteously, as if his tears were wrung out of his body. Gu Mang’s own feelings were complicated; he didn’t know how to cross this chasm of fate, to nullify this pain. There was nothing they could change in the end. He too wished it didn’t have to be Mo Xi doing it; he wished he could create this key himself. But his spiritual core was broken beyond repair. He couldn’t do it.

He stepped forward and embraced Mo Xi, who had come from the battlefields three years later, Mo Xi who had already lost his Gu Mang-gege. He held him, feeling the exhaustion, despair, and helplessness that radiated from his body. To him, the empire’s General Mo had always been that kind youth sitting alone beneath a birch tree, who had been beaten for giving a pair of slave siblings money for food. He’d wanted to protect him for a lifetime. Yet in the end, Gu Mang had protected everyone on earth—it was Mo Xi alone he’d let down.

“Shixiong…” When Mo Xi spoke again, his tone had lost its edge, sounding dull and muted. As if a raging blaze had burned to its brightest and suddenly snuffed out. “I didn’t come back to fulfill my fate…to hurt you…” said Mo Xi, voice hollow.

“I know.”

“In the future, I’ve already lost you.” Mo Xi choked up, doubling over like that defenseless youth from bygone days who’d been stripped of all of his support. His words were almost unintelligible. “I don’t want to lose you again in the past…”

“I know, Mo Xi. I’m sorry…”

“Why must it be me?”

When he heard him cry like a trapped beast, Gu Mang’s tears, too, began to fall. He held his Mo-shidi tightly, his tears silently soaking Mo

Xi’s clothes.

Why would fate choose Mo Xi? To tell it true, both of them understood perfectly—Mo Xi was the person Gu Mang trusted most. He was the only person who would listen to Gu Mang, who would be able to complete this final act of cruelty. Without the key, soon after this soul-box was handed over to the emperor, he would attain the power of the Demonblood Beast. They wouldn’t even have a few years before the Nine Provinces came to chaos.

The person who knew Gu Mang best, the person most like him, was Mo Xi.

Gu Mang had once said, *Some things must be done, some sacrifices must be made. When fate comes knocking, you have to face it if you don’t want to be a coward. We all have our paths to walk.*

This was the path they had to take. The final stretch.

Resentment, dissatisfaction, suffering—none of these could override the clearsighted awareness of what they must do. It was carved into their bones. Not since the day they enlisted in the army, since the day they became generals, could they extricate themselves from the bonds of their duty.

General Gu was General Gu, not a traitor. And General Mo was no coward.

Those who became commanders possessed no earth-shaking power or military glory. There were only a series of burdens placed before them, burdens they had to pick up even if the pain destroyed them. This was what it meant to be a general.

“Do what the Reversal Stone needs you to do, Mo Xi,” Gu Mang murmured. “I know the place you’ve come from is already a sea of blood, but I believe you haven’t seen its conclusion yet. If that’s how the world ends, why would the Stone of Destiny bring you back here to repair this bit of fate?”

He comforted him, just as he had when they charged into battle in the past. Though they knew nothing of what the future might bring, he consoled

and encouraged him. Where General Gu was, there was fire and there was light. His warmth was enough to make others feel this wasn't the end. "There will come a turn for the better."

"But will that turn…still have you in it?" Mo Xi mumbled, his eyes vacant.

Gu Mang fell silent.

"Have you foreseen it?" Mo Xi rasped.

Gu Mang released Mo Xi's hand and stood before him, solemn. "There's a dream I've had over and over again. But just like how I couldn't be sure my visions were real before I saw you, I can't be sure if this one is foresight, or if it's because I…I've missed you too much."

Gu Mang heaved a long sigh. He seemed to pour everything into his next words, as if to give Mo Xi all the brightness and love he ever possessed, to smooth over his scarred and wounded heart. His blue eyes glimmered softly with tears. "I dreamed the war was won, and then it rained. In that rain, I found you."

Perhaps he had found a thread of hope, or perhaps he merely longed for the barest hint of comfort—Mo Xi gazed into those clear blue eyes, and asked, as if in a dream, "What happened then?"

"I said to you, 'let's go home.'"

Mo Xi's lips trembled, tears gathering again in his eyes. He lowered his gaze, blinking slowly.

"Then the rain stopped, and we went home."

The two of them were alike in this too: Neither dared believe this most beautiful dream was truly a premonition. In the future, Gu Mang had already lost his life. Yet a flicker of courage flared in Mo Xi's heart. Such was his love for Gu Mang that he was willing to take the slightest spark of hope for a blazing wildfire. Mo Xi asked hungrily, a sorrowful plea: "And in the end?"

"In the end, you and I were never apart again."

A warm smile bloomed over Gu Mang’s gaunt face. He reached out, interlocking his fingers with Mo Xi’s. “As long as it’s not the end, there’s still hope. After I sacrificed myself, you never imagined I would speak to you again and hold your hand like this, isn’t that right? Mo Xi, no matter what happens, you’ve never been willing to admit defeat. I’m no different. I know you also hold compassion for the people and place the needs of the nation first. We’ve always shared the same goal. So—do as the Reversal Stone wishes.”

As he spoke, he stood on his tiptoes and gently kissed Mo Xi on the lips. “In life or in death, I’ll love you forever. You’ll always make me proud.”

Chapter 192:
Bygone Oath

TEARING OUT THE SOUL, forging the key—it was like a nightmare, like drifting through hell. Mo Xi didn't know how he managed it. It was like he had already died. His own soul seemed to be floating at the top of the tent, fluttering as it looked down on the two people within. He saw everything he did, saw Gu Mang's blood streaming from his chest when his soul was taken. He saw the man whose soul was being torn out telling him again and again, *It's okay, it's okay.*

Many years ago, Gu-shixiong had grinned in front of the bonfire as he told Mo Xi that he hoped for peace throughout the Nine Provinces, for everyone to be treated equally. To this end, he would willingly throw himself into the flame, be ground into ash. Now, those words seemed like a curse.

The key was finally created in the form of a sapphire thumb ring held in Mo Xi's trembling hand. He folded it into Gu Mang's palm, then used every healing spell he knew to treat Gu Mang's wounds, trying to staunch the bleeding. But his tears still fell like beads off a string, streaming down his cheeks to mix with the blood.

Gu Mang coughed again and again. He should have passed out from the pain, but he kept those limpid eyes open by sheer force of will, staring unblinkingly into Mo Xi's face. He'd lost two mortal souls. The last of his memories and rationality were about to collapse and disappear, but pain was his longtime companion, something he'd been experiencing since the moment he entered Liao on secret orders. He could endure it, could look at his Mo-shidi with a clear head for a little while longer. Gu Mang knew that in this lifetime, he could only be described as selfless where he himself was concerned. Toward Mo Xi, he had always been selfish. Gu Mang had offered up all of his passion, his lifeblood, and even his souls for the equal world for which he yearned. But for Mo Xi, he had left only wounds and the pain of separation.

Perhaps it was only in this moment that the Gu Mang from three years ago on the verge of forgetting, and the Mo Xi from three years later on the verge of leaving, could have the sincerity and peace they'd yearned for all their lives.

Mo Xi was still trying to heal the gash in Gu Mang's chest when Gu Mang caught his hand, the ghost of a smile passing over his face. "There's no need… Don't worry, nothing will happen to me. Mo Xi, you know I won't die that easily. Do you think the King of Liao never tried to kill me? Do you think His Imperial Majesty never tried to assassinate me?

"They didn't kill me, but not for the reasons they gave—that my mutation was too severe and they didn't know what would happen if I died. They all tried it a long time ago, but in the end, they—" Gu Mang coughed. "—they failed. They knew I'd merged with the Demonblood Beast. Only at the time of its death would I meet my own end, so…" He paused to catch his breath. "Shidi, you don't need to heal me… Talk to me a little… I just want to talk to you a little longer, okay?"

Mo Xi took hold of his bloody hand and pressed it to his cheek. At length, he choked out, "Okay."

Gu Mang smiled. He looked vibrant and a little feral when he smiled, even now.

"What do you want to talk about?" rasped Mo Xi.

"Nothing in particular…" Gu Mang raised his eyes toward the top of the tent, where a small patch of starry sky was visible. "I just… I really wanted to say sorry to you. Mo Xi, w-was I…too selfish? I wasn't truthful with you about so many things, while you…you've always bared your heart to me…"

Mo Xi shook his head. "You didn't have a choice." *I know how hard it was for you to be a spy, to drift between lies and truth.*

When Gu Mang turned his head, Mo Xi saw tears shining in the corners of his eyes. "Shidi…" He reached out to cup Mo Xi's face, but he hadn't much strength left. Mo Xi took hold of his hand and kissed it, bringing it back to his own cheek. Gu Mang looked at him hazily for a

while, eyes rimmed in unfading red. Neither of them spoke. There was nothing that needed to be said.

Gu Mang closed his eyes, tears streaming down his cheeks. “I was still too cruel to you…”

“You didn’t have a choice,” Mo Xi repeated. “And I…I was willing to endure it, from the bottom of my heart. I knew you had your own dreams, I knew what was on your mind… You’ve done so well, you’ve done everything you could do… It’s just that we…can’t fight fate…”

Gu Mang looked up again, staring silently at that little square of stars. “But I’ve always been fighting…fighting against fate…”

“I know.”

“We didn’t win. But did they?”

Mo Xi started. “What?”

“Those brothers who died in vain at Phoenix Cry Mountain… Did they win?” Gu Mang looked at him nervously, eyes welling with fresh tears. “Did they get justice…in the end?” His voice softened to a hush. “What about Zhanxing? Did he…?”

Though Mo Xi understood what he meant, it didn’t make him feel any better. He tightened his grip on Gu Mang’s hand, turning to kiss him and nodding helplessly. “Yes, you brought them home. They were never wrong in calling you General Gu, and Lu Zhanxing, he was never…” Mo Xi hesitated, sorrow choking him. “Was never…wrong in taking you as his brother.”

“You know about that?”

Mo Xi lowered tear-sodden lashes. “I’m sorry. I never treated him well.”

Gu Mang smiled. His expression was genuine; though his face was haggard and bloodless, he looked very much like he had the past. “Don’t worry. Actually, Zhanxing was fond of you… Or, he didn’t dislike you, I know that much. And Murong Lian—what about Murong Lian? Did he wreck himself further?”

“He did not…”

Gu Mang looked relieved. He turned his clear eyes on Mo Xi, slightly cautious and uneasy. “Mo Xi, in the years where I lost my memories…did it hurt you very much?”

At Mo Xi’s silence, Gu Mang said softly, “I hurt you, didn’t I?” The light in his eyes wobbled, on the edge of shattering into lakes and oceans of sorrow. Mo Xi watched the brightness on his face wither, watched the stars in Gu Mang’s eyes go out—how could he bear it?

“No,” he said.

“Really?”

“Yes.” Mo Xi smiled, throat tight. He wanted to rekindle those bright stars, so he continued. “It’s true. Even when you lost two mortal souls and your memories, you were always…you were always good to me… You never, ever made me sad. That’s all true.”

“In my heart, I’ve always thought of you as a very, very good person?”

“Always,” said Mo Xi.

The uncertainty in Gu Mang’s expression made Mo Xi ache to comfort him. “You remembered me, more or less… I left you something. I left it with you, so you never forgot me completely.”

As if to prove it, he reached toward his belt, hoping to find some token of love to give to Gu Mang. But he had just come from the battlefield. Other than the Reversal Stone he had to take with him back to the present, he’d brought nothing else. As he felt about helplessly, his fingers grazed something soft. He looked down in the moonlight. What he saw left him stunned.

It was the brocade pouch that held the Reversal Stone.

He had been in such a rush to return to the past, he hadn’t looked closely at the brocade sachet Jiang Fuli had handed him. Now he saw the pouch had leagues of dawn embroidered in gold and waves of rivers and mountains picked out in silver, with a pendant of red agate crystal sewn beneath.

This… This was…

A distant memory stirred to life. It was the very same brocade pouch Gu Mang had stubbornly defended during their reunion in Luomei Pavilion.

Mo Xi had been furious the first time he'd laid eyes on it. Gu Mang had held it so tightly and spoken to him so firmly when he said, "Someone was good to me."

He was the one who gave me this brocade pouch.

Mo Xi's blood ran cold. In a flash, he saw fate's design. He felt another pang of sorrow, a dark shadow passing over his heart. Unbearable bitterness filled his throat; it was all he could do to keep from breaking down in tears.

The one he'd been so jealous of for giving Gu Mang this brocade pouch was, as it turned out, none other than himself. The man Gu Mang hadn't forgotten even after losing his mind and his memories…was also himself. It had always been him, only him.

"Are you all right?"

"It's nothing." Mo Xi pushed down his overwhelming grief, unfastening the pouch from around his waist with trembling fingers. He placed it in Gu Mang's hand.

Gu Mang looked at it and smiled. "This is the love token? Through this, I was able to remember you, even after I forgot everything else?"

"Yes."

"Then I…should leave you a love token, too."

He patted himself down, but a prisoner had few belongings. In the end, all he managed to find were a couple of little white cowrie shells. Calling on his weak spiritual energy, Gu Mang inscribed his own name on one of the shells and handed it to Mo Xi. "For you. No matter what you face when you go back, I'll be by your side."

He raised a hand to write Mo Xi's name on the other shell, for himself, but realized he was about to face Murong Lian, Murong Chen, and the harshest torture known to Chonghua. He couldn't keep a cowrie shell

with Mo Xi's name on it. Thus, he only wrote the left half of the character for *Xi*, a peak like a leaping flame with a stroke on either side—the character for "fire."

Gu Mang carefully dropped the cowrie shell into the brocade pouch. "This will be enough." He smiled. "I'll remember you."

With this, all of Mo Xi's questions about the brocade pouch were answered. The wave of heartbreak crashed down upon him with devastating force. He recalled how, before Gu Mang's death, he'd once opened this brocade pouch Gu Mang so treasured. He'd seen the cowrie shell inside, mottled and stained, inscribed with the word *fire*. Nettled, he couldn't help asking, "Who gave this to you?"

Gu Mang had said he didn’t know. All he remembered was that the person in question was very dear to him.

“Mo Xi…” Seeing his expression, Gu Mang reached up and gently patted him on the shoulder. He knew his remaining lucid moments were few, and the time for Mo Xi to return to the future was near. He could feel his mind slowing, could see Mo Xi’s body beginning to glow and blur.

This was yet another farewell. He tried to comfort Mo Xi once more, as he had in the past—to encourage this hero who was about to return to the battlefield. In truth, they were both of them alike: They only wanted a home together. They craved neither fame nor military achievement. They hadn’t chosen to be heroes because they found it in any way thrilling, glorious, or awe-inspiring. Rather, it was because they’d tasted too much bitterness and separation—they didn’t want others to suffer as they had. That was all.

“Mo Xi, go back,” said Gu Mang softly. He let his hand fall, taking hold of Mo Xi’s fading fingers and using the last of his strength to give them a squeeze.

There was no reply. Just as he thought the Reversal Stone’s effects had prevented Mo Xi from hearing him, he saw that Mo Xi’s shoulders were shaking.

“Shidi…” rasped Gu Mang.

Mo Xi didn’t say anything, as if some vital flame had been extinguished inside him. His silhouette, lost and shadowed, seemed to overlap in Gu Mang’s vision with that of the lonely youth who had first joined the army. At the time, the Mo Clan had fallen from grace, and his future was unknown. Mo Xi had sat alone, apart from the clamoring soldiers. Other than Gu Mang, no one was willing to dirty themselves in his family’s filth. No one gave that lost young master anything resembling a smile.

Gu Mang wanted badly to embrace Mo Xi one more time, to tell him everything would be fine—he was still here, he wouldn’t leave. But he quickly realized he’d no right to say this ever again. Mo Xi had already lost his Gu Mang-gege in the future. There would never again be someone he

could stand with against the world, someone whose hand he could take as they returned home together. “I’m sorry…”

Mo Xi closed his eyes, then shook his head. He had never been an eloquent lover; he was too formal and awkward, often failing to say anything remotely charming. He merely, in his clumsy way, understood Gu Mang, respected him, and accepted him.

At last, he silently picked up the little cowrie shell Gu Mang had made for him. He tucked it into his lapels, in the spot closest to his heart, to keep it safe. He wanted to get up, as calm and upright as every other time they had parted ways. But in the end, he couldn’t do it. As he moved forward, it seemed as if his bones had been shattered, his heart ground to dust, his organs plucked out… He doubled over with the unbearable heartache; slowly, he sank to the ground. In that futile past, in this finale of utter defeat, he cried himself silent.

His relationship with Gu Mang had lasted almost twenty years. Yet because of the difference in status between a noble and a slave, because of the conflict between a spy and a general, because of their gender, because of morality, because of this reason or that, it had never been respected; their love was condemned to darkness and robbed of promise. And in the end, Gu Mang had chosen to sacrifice himself and could no longer return to him.

But Mo Xi knew Gu Mang had loved him for nearly half his life. As a spy for the empire, General Gu had expended nearly all his passion and almost every drop of his lifeblood to keep his secrets. Of what was left—those remaining hints of warmth, those shattered bits of time and sincerity—he had given it all unquestioningly to Mo Xi. What Gu Mang felt for him was no less than the loyalty, love, and selflessness anyone on earth would give their lifetime companion. Mo Xi was his dearest, his beloved, the only one in his heart. But because Gu Mang was a spy, he didn’t dare to—he had no way to—write down his lover’s full name, even secretly, to keep beside his heart.

That brocade pouch that had traveled through space and time could only hold a cowrie shell with *fire* written upon it. It was the only love token they had. Beyond this, there was never anything else.

Both of them wanted to speak, but at that moment, Mo Xi's vision went dark. The Reversal Stone had reached the limits of its power. It burned white-hot in his hand. He couldn't help calling out one last time. "Gu Mang!"

Gu Mang gazed quietly back at him. There were tears in his blue eyes, but he was smiling. In the last moment before he lost consciousness, Mo Xi heard hasty footsteps outside the tent and the voices of guards.

"Wangshu-jun!"

"Greetings to Wangshu-jun!"

He would depart, and Murong Lian would walk in. The wheel of fate would spin cruelly along the groove carved for it, and Mo Xi would return to the bloodbath of three years hence.

The Reversal Stone was a trick the gods had left for mortals. He'd traveled back to the past and hadn't changed a thing.

In the final moment before he returned, he saw Gu Mang holding that cowrie shell with half Mo Xi's name against his chest, against that place where the blood hadn't yet dried, the place closest to his heart. Gu Mang gazed at him without a word, but his endless love was unmistakable in his eyes.

Mo Xi, little shidi. Go. Regardless of how broken my memories are, regardless of how much time passes, I'll keep my love for you in my heart. I'm sorry I can't stay by your side forever, I'm sorry I can't tell you everything without reservation. In the future, I'll hide things from you, lie to you, and walk alone toward death. I dragged you down and I failed you. I regret it so much. But I've never…never once regretted loving you.

Go back, Mo Xi. I hope in the future, just like in my dream, we'll find each other again in the rain.

Chapter 193:
With You

WHEN MO XI hazily came to, he found himself in darkness.

His eyes were wide open; the ache in his chest like a sharp awl had pierced his heart. He could still see that last glimpse of Gu Mang's face, smiling at him through the tears and blood. Mo Xi closed his eyes, hot tears streaming down his cheeks.

But he wasn't yet done. Gu Mang had offered up his blood, flesh, and bone in order to pave this path. Now Gu Mang was gone, and it was left to Mo Xi to fulfill this unfinished wish on behalf of his beloved. Even if his pain already felt like death by a thousand cuts.

The jut of his throat bobbed as he swallowed acrid bitterness. Slowly, he sat up.

Indeed—it wasn't done; this wasn't the end. Gu Mang was no longer here, yet Chonghua still had Mo Xi. The Nine Provinces still had Mo Xi. As long as he was still alive, Gu Mang wasn't completely gone. He would tend to Gu Mang's embers until the day he too died on this path.

He looked around through reddened eyes. This place was formless, like the primordial chaos that preceded Pangu's creation of the universe. Mo Xi lay on a surface that looked like water, but he didn't sink beneath it. It would have resembled ice if not for the ripples running through it.

He looked down and saw his own reflection. How strange—curling ribbons of dark purple smoke drifted around him. The purple-black wisps floated from his heart and dissipated into the air. Beyond this, a massive ball of hazy silver light swayed in the distance. What it was, he couldn't quite make out, but its enormous silhouette looked a little like his holy weapon Tuntian.

"That *is* your weapon, the holy weapon Tuntian."

A solemn voice sounded from behind him. Mo Xi whipped around to find a man in fluttering white robes standing at the boundary of the

darkness. The stranger was tall and elegantly proportioned, with a majestic and commanding air. He was enveloped in spiritual fog, rendering his features hazy and unclear. One could faintly perceive that his features were well-defined, his skin like cold jade, and there was a sharp edge to his handsomeness.

Mo Xi was startled. This man had seemed to see into his thoughts. “Who are you?”

There was no answer.

Mo Xi rose and walked toward him. Yet no matter how many steps he took, that man remained at a constant distance, as if Mo Xi could never draw nearer. Mo Xi was already in a dismal mood and had no interest in wasting his time. Coming to a halt, he asked, “Where are we?”

This time, the man spoke. “You are inside the Reversal Stone. The world inside this stone is outside the realms you know. It is a separate domain.”

Mo Xi closed his eyes, gritting his teeth through the pain pulsing at his temples. “You’re the deity in charge of this stone?”

“More or less. My identity is unimportant. I am merely a wisp of a deity’s spiritual energy left behind to guard the stone. My true form is meaningless to you.”

So this dark, liminal place was actually divine. Mo Xi had lost all reverence for gods after the trial he’d been through. Facing this god of the Reversal Stone, he coldly said, “I have nothing to say to you. Let me out.”

The god shook his head. “You cannot leave yet.”

Overcome with sorrow and fury, Mo Xi snapped, “What else do you want?!”

Despite his offensive manner, this being of spiritual energy didn’t seem to mind. He regarded Mo Xi with a faint melancholy bordering on indifference. “Mo Xi, there is no need to direct your hatred at me. Your fate is not in my hands. I’m no more than a shadow left in this stone by true power. You’ve fulfilled the destiny embedded in this Reversal Stone, and thus I’ve achieved my purpose. In fact, you’ve done me a kindness.”

“A kindness…” The word caught between Mo Xi’s lips and twisted into mocking laughter. His voice was hoarse, his scarlet-rimmed eyes spiderwebbed with red lines. “All right. Repay that kindness, then, and do something. Whether it was Gu Mang, Lu Zhanxing, or those nameless soldiers, forgotten by everyone… In these past few centuries, far too many have died.” He gazed at that indistinct figure. “If you’re a god, you should have seen this coming a long time ago.”

“Yes.”

“Then why didn’t you stop it? If you sit by and do nothing, you’re no better than a demon!”

The god of the stone closed his eyes. It initially seemed he wouldn’t answer, but after a moment of silence, he spoke. “Mo Xi, gods cannot save mortals; gods can only light the way for them to save themselves. I’ve called you into the realm of this Reversal Stone to tell you that everything is about to come to an end. All that remains is the final step.”

“Hua Po’an has lived for centuries on earth,” Mo Xi said. “He’s merged himself with demons and scarcely counts as a living person anymore. I returned to the past to destroy the power of the Demonblood Beast, only to be told that the Reversal Stone has no such power. Tell me, how are we supposed to save ourselves?”

He pressed every question, and the god of the stone listened to every word. In the end, this wisp of spiritual energy let out a sigh. “I know your heart holds resentment and hatred. I won’t try to persuade you otherwise, but…” He paused. “Hua Po’an is not invincible. His power is bound to the Demonblood Beast. I’ve called you here precisely for this reason: to tell you how to uncouple his magic from the demon beast’s.”

Mo Xi was silent, jaw clenched to hold back his endless fury. “Fine. Speak.”

“The key to this method,” the god said, “is your understanding of what happened in your past.”

Mo Xi was stunned. “My past?”

The god swept his wide sleeves back and pointed down at the water that rippled without wind below their feet. “Yes. A Reversal Stone reflects a person’s soul. Your body is a vessel, containing all the joys and sorrows of your life, all the love and loathing you’ve received. Everything will appear in the reflection beneath your feet.”

Mo Xi looked down once more. His reflection was a representation of him. The phantom whale represented his strongest weapon. But what was that black qi issuing from his heart?

“That is the demonic poison Murong Chen implanted in your body.”

He remembered now—it was likely the controlling poison Mengze had removed at such great cost. During the confrontation in the throne room, Murong Mengze had reported that she’d discovered this poisonous curse when she rescued Mo Xi after Gu Mang stabbed him at Dongting Lake. She had gone behind Murong Chen’s back and extracted it. The price of this act had been the integrity of her spiritual core: She could never work the strongest spells ever again.

It was as though all of Mo Xi’s thoughts had been written out before the god’s eyes. “You are wrong,” the deity said. “It was never Murong Mengze.”

Mo Xi looked up. “What?”

“It was not Murong Mengze who removed the poison.”

Silence.

“Your true savior cut into your chest to undo the curse, but he was deep behind enemy lines. Firstly, he couldn’t let Murong Chen discover what he did, and secondly, there was no way he could stay alone with you under the watchful gaze of the Liao Kingdom. He coordinated with Murong Mengze and asked her to keep this a secret.”

All the blood seemed to rush into Mo Xi’s head, ringing in his ears. “What… What are you saying?” he asked, fingers trembling.

“At the battle of Dongting Lake, Gu Mang stabbed you for a reason. He had discovered what Murong Chen did while spying in Liao. He lured

you to the battleship and stabbed you, making certain you were unconscious.

“When you awoke, all you knew was that Murong Mengze had rushed to the scene and brought you back to the camp. That she sacrificed her own core to heal you. But the truth is…” The deity paused. “After you lost consciousness, it was Gu Mang who brought you into a secret room of the battleship and removed the poison. He let Murong Mengze break through on purpose and handed you over to her.”

Mo Xi’s face was white as snow. His blood had frozen into ice, disbelief etched into every line of him as he listened.

“Gu Mang was well aware of Murong Mengze’s true character. She’s never been as straightforward as she appears—she is an imperial scion with her own ambitions and schemes. But although she is ruthless and cruel, she is not mad like her brother. Gu Mang knew you would be a key source of aid to Murong Mengze; she’d want nothing more than to win you to her side. When offered such a valuable gift for free, she’d certainly accept, even if it was dangerous.”

Mo Xi’s throat seemed to be filling with ice. After a long beat, he heard a rough and raspy voice, so unfamiliar he hardly recognized it as his own. “Mengze was never the one…who saved my life? Gu Mang let her take credit for it?”

“There was nothing else he could do,” said the god. “He hoped to be subjected to your hatred, hoped that you would gain Murong Mengze’s protection, hoped that Murong Chen wouldn’t control you in the future. He had no other choice.”

“Then Mengze’s spiritual core was never…?”

“Correct. She was never injured. She’s a healer and the master of Shennong Terrace—it was a simple thing to simulate the signs of frailty. Only two people knew her secret: Mengze herself, and Gu Mang.” The god’s voice was cool. “It was she who sent Zhou He to perform the interrogation when she saw that Gu Mang was regaining his memories. Mengze ordered him to prevent his recovery by any means necessary.”

Mo Xi was stunned. “Zhou He was acting under her orders?”

“Yes, Zhou He is one of Mengze’s men, and a close confidant. The one who has been trying to prevent Gu Mang’s recovery all this time was none other than Murong Mengze. Your gratitude was a tool she wouldn’t relinquish, and she couldn’t be sure Gu Mang wouldn’t tell you the truth upon remembering the past. She made several attempts to corrode Gu Mang’s sanity, hoping he’d lose his mind once more. As long as his wits were lost, no one else would know who truly saved your life.”

“Impossible,” murmured Mo Xi. “She…she had so many chances to harm him, but she always took such patient care of Gu Mang. She even advised me to go to Lin’an in search of that master cultivator…”

“Advised you?” The deity scoffed. “That childish heart of yours is naive, to be sure. The Yue Clan’s mishaps saved Gu Mang. If all had gone according to Murong Mengze’s plan, Gu Mang’s mind would be wholly destroyed when you two found this grandmaster cultivator.”

The god met Mo Xi’s shocked gaze. “Mo Xi, did you think she would let anything happen to Gu Mang while he was under her direct care? Yet she acted multiple times. The first was the assassination attempt on Murong Lian. The second was when Gu Mang was recovering in the treatment room—it was she who appeared and told him the truth about the Vow of Calamity. She intended to break Gu Mang’s mind and make him lose control. She had almost succeeded when you showed up and prevented Gu Mang from falling entirely into her hands. If she had insisted on carrying out her plan regardless and Gu Mang had fallen ill on her watch, would you not have begun to suspect her?”

“So…” Mo Xi’s chest felt tight. There was no fury in him anymore, only endless cold and exhaustion. “If we had gone to the wilds of Lin’an,” he murmured. “We wouldn’t have found the real grandmaster cultivator…”

“That’s right. You’d have merely found Mengze herself in disguise, waiting for you two to take the bait.”

Mo Xi looked up into the sky and laughed bitterly. Mengze… Mengze… Even *she* had her own schemes? It seemed that throughout his adulthood, almost everyone around him was working their own agendas,

whether through imperial machinations, conflicts between nobles, or mundane trickery. Nearly everything he knew was false.

Was the throne, and the power it held, really so precious? Was it worth toiling for a lifetime and sacrificing everyone else's sincerity to one's own pitiless ambition? He found the idea absurd. In the past few years, how many of the faces around him had he seen for what they were? Was a life so full of lies and manipulation really worth it?

"Mo Xi, you mustn't think of it like this. Such a price may not be worth it to you, but for Murong Chen and Murong Mengze, it very much is," said the god. "You are too honest, while Gu Mang is too idealistic. Men like you might become saints, but it would be hard for you to be rulers."

Mo Xi closed his eyes, murmuring wearily, "Murong Mengze wants to become a ruler…"

"No. She wants far more than the throne of Chonghua. The heavens didn't grant her this fate, so she seized it for herself. Rare is the monarch who is pure and clean—so it's always been, since antiquity. Mengze is ruthless indeed, but…" He paused. "For a ruler, ability and wisdom are most crucial. All else is less so. Perhaps it is cruel and unfair, but people wear a thousand faces, and everyone has their own strengths. Without touching on matters of right or wrong, I can say with confidence that this person is more suited to ruling a nation than Murong Chen, Murong Lian, Gu Mang, or even you."

The god of the stone took in Mo Xi's silence for a moment before continuing. "Now that you know of this…" He swept his sleeves aside, gazing at Mo Xi through the cool mist. "Mo Xi, once you return, will you seek her out for revenge?"

Five years ago—even three years ago—everything in Mo Xi's heart had been clearly separated into black and white. His emotions were distinctly defined as love or hatred, as if everything on earth could be fairly deemed right or wrong. He knew now that there was much in the world that was not ideal, much that blurred the lines of good and evil.

Yet his Gu-shixiong had always told him that no matter what others did, no matter if fate was fair, one had to follow their own conscience above

all. Even in the harshest frost in the dead of winter, there were still plum blossoms that fought against the snow and pines that stood tall and unbent in the wind. To remain unchanged by fame or power, by suffering or hardship, by eternal night or even death—that was the meaning of remaining true to oneself.

The god waited. When Mo Xi didn't answer, he pointed again at the lake's surface. "If you haven't thought it through, there's no need to give me an answer. Whether or not you seek vengeance, you may decide once you return to Chonghua and meet with her. I will now speak to you of the second important matter."

"What is that?"

"Look at Tuntian in the water. Don't you think it's strange that your reflection features Tuntian's shadow?"

"Tuntian is my holy weapon," said Mo Xi. "Of course it would appear…"

"Then where is Shuairan?"

Startled, Mo Xi looked up.

"Have you never wondered," the god of the stone asked mildly, "why Tuntian would have such colossal powers of destruction, far greater than any other holy weapon?" A pause. "In truth, Tuntian isn't a normal holy weapon at all."

Mo Xi's eyes widened.

"You already know that the previous emperor of Chonghua hoped to create a spiritual creature capable of fighting the Demonblood Beast using the forbidden techniques left behind by Chen Tang. Everyone believed he failed—the late emperor himself believed this as well. But it was not so." The god's robes fluttered as he spoke steadily. "Among those who participated in the crafting of the spirit beast, some—like Murong Lian's father and Zhou He's father—never wavered in their faith in the old emperor. Others, however, saw how the emperor's greed was growing for more black magic. One of these men was your father."

Mo Xi shuddered.

“In fact, they were successful in refining the Spiritblessed Beast. But it awoke with a mind, and only showed its power to the one it found worthy. The others thought its creation was a failure, but this wasn’t true. They merely failed the spirit beast’s test, and so never knew it had attained the form of a spiritual pearl. Your father, Mo Qingchi, was the only one the spirit beast acknowledged.

“The spirit beast appeared before him alone and acknowledged him as its master. Then it sorrowfully told its master a prophecy that came true: He would soon die in battle, and his family would fall apart. Only the strongest magic could keep his son safe—the spirit beast itself.”

Mo Xi took a step back. “What…”

“I knew this would shock you. But it is the truth, Mo Xi. When your father learned he would die, he sealed the holy beast’s spirit pearl inside you, so that it would accept you as its master and keep you safe until you were grown. How else would you have such astonishing innate power? Your capabilities far exceed the scope of natural talent. They’ve been an anomaly from the start.”

Mo Xi trembled in recollection. He thought about the killing power of Tuntian that could level cities, the power he’d always held at bay. His fingertips were numb with cold.

“You thought Tuntian was the holy weapon you summoned after you were taught how, but that’s false,” said the god. “Tuntian is the soul of the spirit beast Mo Qingchi left for you, and the source of your fearsome spiritual energy.” The god of the stone stared into Mo Xi’s eyes, speaking every word deliberately. “The Spiritblessed Beast has been sealed inside you all along. The only person on earth who can completely destroy the Demonblood Beast…is you.”

His face was devoid of color. His eyes were wide as he stared blankly at the god of the Reversal Stone. As the god finished speaking, the spiritual fog around him grew denser, obscuring his already blurred silhouette. His voice thinned and became distant, as if he was speaking across mountains and oceans.

“Mo Xi…it’s no coincidence that the Reversal Stone chose you. Once I release the seal on Tuntian, you will have full control of the Spiritblessed Beast’s power, equal to that of the Demonblood Beast. At that point, you will have two choices. You can choose to take revenge on Murong Mengze. With the Spiritblessed Beast, you can kill her, surround the city, and ascend the throne yourself. You can use Tuntian’s barrier to protect the capital of Chonghua. The Demonblood Beast’s blood sea will swallow the entirety of the Nine Provinces, but Chonghua City will remain untouched. You could rule safely in your own land.

“Or, after waking Tuntian, you can choose to sink into the depths of the blood sea. There, you will find the Demonblood Beast’s heart. If you use the Spiritblessed Beast’s spiritual energy to counteract it, you can destroy it, and the sea of blood will become an ordinary lake. Hua Po’an will lose his source of power and become a regular man who can be defeated. The Nine Provinces will be saved, but…” The god paused, his voice echoing like a bell. “You will die with the Demonblood Beast. Thereafter, you will be excluded from the wheel of reincarnation, never to return to this world.”

This should have been cruel news, but it barely registered for Mo Xi. Over the past two hours, he had sundered Gu Mang’s souls and learned this god’s wild revelations. It seemed nothing could hurt him more than what he’d already been through.

The immortal mist around the god of the stone grew thicker, making his expression hard to discern. After a long span, he seemed to sigh softly. “Of these two paths…no one will force you to take one or the other. I said that gods cannot save people; they can only light the way for mortals to save themselves. In the same way, gods will not force you to make a choice. You must choose your own path to walk…”

The god disappeared within the cold fog. Suddenly Mo Xi felt himself shoved forward. The darkness broke apart into countless glimmering shards, fluttering and dancing before his eyes. He saw the past thirty years of his life flickering in these fragments: He saw Mo Qingchi standing beneath the osmanthus tree when he was a child. His father’s

gauntleted hand reached out. Smiling, he asked, “Little Fireball, what are you doing here?”

He saw the first time he met Jiang Yexue: That gentle and modest boy stood quietly by the palace terrace, speaking with his mother about something. At his mother’s behest, he turned. “Hello, my name is Yue Yexue. Are you the little gongzi of Mo Manor?”

He saw Murong Lian abusing Gu Mang in countless ways at the academy. At that time, Mo Xi hadn’t known of the familial attachments buried in the depths of Murong Lian’s heart beneath his hateful jealousy.

He saw Murong Chuyi striding haughtily down a corridor. He had once thought this person just as uncaring as the rumors made out; only later did he learn of the vast compassion Murong Chuyi held hidden in his heart.

He glimpsed the day he and Gu Mang had turned on each other—on the decks of that ship during the battle of Dongting Lake, Gu Mang in black robes, walking toward him through the smoke and flames with Yongye in hand. Gu Mang had been wearing one of Chonghua’s merit ribbons, taken from a corpse. Mo Xi had thought this was Gu Mang’s insult to the heroes, rather than a sign of the longing Gu Mang harbored for Chonghua.

Gu Mang had said darkly: “As a general, as a soldier, and as a person, you can’t be too attached to past affections.”

But he’d later found out that Gu Mang never once forgot those seventy thousand gravestones or those thirty thousand living men, in every second he spent in Liao. He neither forgot his homeland, nor any of the cities in the Nine Provinces. Mo Xi had once hated Gu Mang for his cold-bloodedness and refusal to turn from his path. But in truth, Gu Mang had never betrayed them or gone astray. He had forged ahead alone, hacking his way through the underbrush to blaze a new and bloody path.

He had thought it was Gu Mang who cut into his heart and Mengze who saved it, but the truth was…

Mo Xi closed his eyes. Bitterness and sorrow swept like a wildfire through his chest. It burned to the bottom of his heart, wetting his reddened eyes. The realm of the Reversal Stone collapsed around him. The countless

voices and smiles, tricks and lies from his past crashed down like a mighty wave, a tide that pushed him out of this world.

The words of the Reversal Stone's god seemed to echo in his ears. To take revenge and protect the city, or to throw himself into the blood sea. *Of these two paths, you must choose…*

Even with his eyes closed, Mo Xi could sense the coming of dawn. He could hear the wailing of the women and children within the city, the bracing shouts of the soldiers, the metallic clash of fighting, the rush of the tide…

He'd returned to the present. Once more, he found himself on the battlefield, three years later. He could hear someone shouting in the distance: "Deploy the left flank to provide support to Medicine Master Jiang!"

"Hua Po'an has gone insane!"

Jiang Fuli had already set out to fight Hua Po'an. The medicine master stubbornly believed he wasn't Chen Tang, yet he still walked into the war against Liao, bearing all of Chen Tang's memories and wishes.

Gu Mang had said that everyone had their own duties to fulfill. Those duties might seem difficult, cruel, or meaningless. Perhaps they'd go unrewarded, or perhaps other people would take up the burden. Why should they be the one charging ahead? Better to spare oneself and hide somewhere safe. Many would think: *Forget it, my life is insignificant. I only want to find my own contentment.* No one wanted to don the hero's mantle.

But there would always be someone who stepped out of the crowd, who put away those personal grudges and thought: *My life may be insignificant, but as long as I can do something that improves this world, this nation, or even just this street, that would be enough.* Gu Mang, Murong Chuyi, Jiang Fuli, Mo Qingchi… All had chosen to walk a narrow path that others might scorn as foolish. Mo Xi knew they were waiting for him at the end of this road.

He opened his eyes. That fading vision disappeared at last. His lashes fluttered, and he found himself returned to that side room. Jiang Fuli had gone. Dawn was breaking outside the window, a sunrise the vivid red of

blood. He looked into the distance, at the cultivators of Chonghua who refused to admit defeat, clashing once more with the Liao army in the clouds. The bright streaks of their mounted swords were like shooting stars falling to earth, charging toward the Liao encampment on the opposite shore. The demonic sea of blood that had claimed Gu Mang's life lapped at the walls beneath the palace window.

Mo Xi stepped forward into the dazzling sunrise, standing against the newborn dawn. He wrapped slender fingers around the railing as he stood in the wind, looking upon his devastated nation.

He suddenly understood the destiny before him—a forking path that hadn't been preordained. All that was certain was that fate would present people with countless trials, feuds, mysteries, and misunderstandings. Very few could pass through it all and reach the shore they'd struck out toward at the beginning.

He looked down at the roiling blood rushing past him and let the spent Reversal Stone fall from his fingers. "Shixiong," he said quietly. "I choose the same path you did. Wait for me—I'm coming after you."

Chapter 194:
The Depths of the Sea

ON THE DISTANT battlefield, the cultivators heard a deafening whistle. The world seemed to come apart as a colossal whale large enough to obscure the sky soared from a tower in the imperial city. That whale roared and howled furiously, its spiritual form larger than anyone had ever seen.

Hua Po'an, locked in combat with Jiang Fuli, looked up. "This—"

Tuntian, unleashed by Mo Xi, no longer had the appearance of a holy weapon. In that glorious dawn, it took on its magnificent true form. It raised its head, and rain fell over the city. Every street was bathed in golden light, and a rainbow arched across the sky.

"The Spiritblessed Beast?!" a soldier cried.

Hua Po'an paled. "When did Chonghua create a spirit beast?!"

Jiang Fuli had been heavily injured, but still gritted his teeth and fought on. "Likely a long time ago. Hua Po'an, you are the one who has underestimated the human heart."

"The human heart?" Hua Po'an sneered, his expression dark and crazed. "In my lifetime, I've been a slave, a king, a guoshi… I've changed my identity and experienced all manner of things; I've seen all there is of the world's unfairness! What good is a human heart? It's no more than the heart of a beast dusted with some gold—a wretched, useless thing!" He narrowed his eyes. "Human hearts have always been as savage as those of beasts. History is written by the victors. Because my ancestor made a mistake, his descendants were slaves for hundreds of years. I, Hua Po'an, put my faith in slaughter alone! I've never underestimated a human heart, but you—Preceptor Chen! You're the one who put too much faith in humanity! You've always thought too highly of these people!"

He leapt directly at Jiang Fuli's chest. The strike angled for his heart, then twisted so that he struck Jiang Fuli's shoulder.

Seeing Jiang Fuli at the limit of his endurance, Su Yurou wailed, “Fuli!”

Hua Po’an’s face was cold and fierce, his eyes glistening with bloodlust as he flicked her a look of scorn. “Shut up, you bitch! You seduced him and made him betray me. I haven’t yet settled the score with you!”

“Guozhu, spare him, I beg of you… I was the one who took him; I was the one who erased his memories. Even after he forgot everything…he still remembered that *Water-Parting Sword Manual* he once gave you… *A sword of five years turns the seasons, a sword of ten years turns back time. This sword’s edge sharp enough to part the waters, this life too short to part my heart from yours*… It wasn’t him who betrayed you, it was me…”

Hua Po’an’s expression flickered with hesitation.

Su Yurou thought only of Jiang Fuli’s safety. Seeing him pause, she pressed on: “He…he always remembered you. Please, don’t hurt him; I’m begging you…”

“Don’t plead with him!” Jiang Fuli snapped. Finally unable to suppress the pain of his internal injuries, he spat out a mouthful of blood. Leaping a few yards backward, he leaned on his sword and panted. “Hear this, Hua Po’an! It is true that I still have some memory of the past—but it is only because I loathe you. The only reason I remember you…is because my hatred for you is etched into my bones.”

Hua Po’an narrowed his eyes, staring at Jiang Fuli in silence. A flash of fear seemed to surface within that madness and cruelty.

Jiang Fuli’s breaths were labored. “In this life—regardless of whether I’m Jiang Fuli or Preceptor Chen Tang—I have only one thing left to say to you.”

The fear was stronger now; Hua Po’an’s expression shifted as he shouted in fury, “Shut up!”

He knew what Jiang Fuli would say: those words Chen Tang hadn’t time to voice before his soul scattered. For centuries, through every obstacle and opportunity, those words had echoed in the depths of his nightmares.

The citadel of fear in his heart had weathered the storm for hundreds of years, yet today, Chen Tang's condemnation was the bolt of lightning that would bring it crashing down.

Jiang Fuli gazed at him in the whistling wind, his expression containing both the cold indifference that belonged to Jiang Fuli and the grieving sorrow that belonged to Chen Tang.

All the hair rose on the back of Hua Po'an's neck. His shouts took on a shrill note of panic. "Shut up! Shut *up*!"

Jiang Fuli's lips parted. Those words of eternal goodbye that had remained unsaid for hundreds of years were finally spoken aloud in this uncanny reenactment of the past. "Hua Po'an, I'm sick to death of you."

Hua Po'an pressed his lips together, his expression distorting. He looked like he wanted to laugh out loud, or like some festering, centuries-old wound had been jabbed. His face had gone pale, and he stared oddly at Jiang Fuli, his pupils contracting.

His face terrified Su Yurou. "Fuli, stop talking!"

But Jiang Fuli went on despite her warning. "Back then, it was Chen Tang who brought you out of slavery, took you in as a disciple, and gave you the name Hua Po'an. Today, I've come to take back this name on his behalf. From now on, you may be the guoshi of Liao, the King of Liao, a deathless demon—you may be whatever you choose to call yourself. But you can never again be Hua Po'an." A weighty pause. "Chen Tang has no disciple with this name."

Hua Po'an's eyes were like two slashes of blood, their whites spiderwebbed with scarlet. "Shizun…" he snarled, gnashing his teeth.

"This title is not one I can accept," Jiang Fuli replied tonelessly.

Hua Po'an's knuckles were white. "Chen Tang! Would you push me so far?!"

"I am not Chen Tang," said Jiang Fuli. "I am a walking corpse that you dragged out of hell. Nor are you Hua Po'an. You're nothing more than…" He paused, his teeth chattering, but still enunciated every word. "An evil dog, one he trusted in the biggest mistake of his life."

Hua Po’an froze as if struck by an invisible lash. Pain spasmed across that face where only malice had flourished. After a long silence, he looked up and laughed, harsh and manic. “Very well—very well!” he shrieked.

He tensed with rage, readying his next attack. But before he could strike, the massive whale swam out from Mo Xi’s tower and rose into the skies. Amid shocked cries from the battlefield, the whale’s form glowed with a dazzling, glorious light. Its call threatened to swallow the sky and its massive tail seemed to touch the sun as it turned its nose and dove toward that surging demonblood sea.

“It’s the Spiritblessed Beast! It really is the Spiritblessed Beast!”

“General Mo can summon the Spiritblessed Beast!”

Hua Po’an had lost control of whatever sanity he had. His strikes grew fiercer and more frenzied as he bore down on Jiang Fuli; the crowd’s shouts didn’t faze him at all. “So what if he can summon the Spiritblessed Beast? At most he can protect the imperial city and hide within it. That child would never go so far as to—”

To die for a country where his lover is already gone. To give his life for these Nine Provinces filled with deception and machinations. To sacrifice himself for the nation that denounced his beloved as the worst kind of traitor.

But before he could say any of this aloud, Mo Xi had ignited the blinding divine light of the Spiritblessed Beast and followed Tuntian, diving into the ocean of blood. There was a sound like a great clap of thunder, and the heavens and earth trembled.

The soldiers of the Northern Frontier Army cried out in grief.

“Xihe-jun!”

“General Mo!”

Hua Po’an couldn’t believe his eyes. Had this person gone mad? Was he insane?! After undergoing such suffering, having lost all his kin and everything he loved, after being subjected to such cruelty from fate, why would he still choose to sacrifice himself for the sake of others? What did

he get out of it? Why did he do it? Did this man…harbor no hate, no selfishness, no desire? Who would make such a choice?

In Hua Po'an's moment of shocked distraction, Jiang Fuli saw his chance and swept out with his sword. Blood splattered as the blade sank deep into Hua Po'an's shoulder. Hua Po'an leapt backward with a grunt and looked down at the sinister gash, so deep he could see the white of bone.

Standing in the bloody wind of the battle, Jiang Fuli hefted his sword and stared at the deathless monster Hua Po'an. Hoarsely, quietly, with lips that dripped blood as they parted, he spoke. "You don't understand, do you? You never will. But…" Pausing, he ran a hand along his blade, radiance blooming in the wake of his fingertips. A gale rose around him, marking this final match against Hua Po'an. "Your defeat hundreds of years ago outside Chonghua City will repeat itself today. Chen Tang wasn't the only person on this earth with the power to stop your wild ambition. The ranks of those willing to sacrifice flesh and blood to protect the people of this nation were never limited to Chen Tang alone!"

Their surroundings shimmered with power as Jiang Fuli threw himself toward Hua Po'an.

At the base of the tower, a wave of blood surged up. Within the protective form of Tuntian, Mo Xi plunged into the depths of the blood sea.

"Medicine Master Jiang!"

"General Mo!"

The battlefield was awash in shocked cries, but Mo Xi could no longer hear them. He had already sunk into the ocean of blood. How strange. In these last moments of his life, he felt as if everything had suddenly become tranquil.

Peering through the field of crimson clouding his vision, he quickly located the heart of the Demonblood Beast sunk deep in that sea of blood. If he destroyed this heart, everything would be over. The blood sea would become a clear lake, and Hua Po'an would lose his source of power and become a mortal who could be slain. As for Mo Xi himself…

The words of the Reversal Stone’s god echoed in his ears. The Nine Provinces will be saved, but you will die with the Demonblood Beast. Thereafter, you will be excluded from the wheel of reincarnation, never to return to this world.

Mo Xi smiled faintly. No longer hesitant, he reached out and touched the pounding heart of the Demonblood Beast. Gu Mang had merged with the demon beast, and Mo Xi had embodied a holy spirit. Yet they had arrived at the same destination in the end.

Floating in the depths of the bloody sea, Mo Xi spoke to the beating heart before him. “Gu Mang, this is the path I’ve chosen. Wait for me. I’m coming.”

He brought his palms to its pulsating form, light coruscating through his fingers. When the spiritual energy of Tuntian and Jingchen met, it wasn’t with the fierce and murderous clash he’d expected. Perhaps it was precisely because the two hosts of the spiritual beasts had once been so deeply entwined that Mo Xi felt no pain, even as a violent undertow roared from the depths of the blood sea and dragged him down. He merely felt his vision growing blurrier and his body lighter—a sense of freedom that came at the end of everything.

As the Demonblood Beast’s heart was destroyed, the blood around him gradually transformed into clear water, spreading outward like ink on paper. Slowly, the sea of blood became blood no longer. The scarlet pit swallowing the Nine Provinces became flowing water that nourished the land.

Mo Xi choked up filthy blood. His spiritual energy was spent, and water was filling his mouth and nose. He could no longer breathe. He looked up, knowing he had come to his fated end. The Reversal Stone had given him two paths, life or death, and he had chosen the latter.

Gu Mang had merged souls with the Demonblood Beast, but he still managed to blaze with a lifetime’s worth of light. Since Mo Xi was the one fused with the Spiritblessed Beast, how…how could he possibly lose to his Gu Mang-gege?

A relieved smile spread over his face. Sunlight spilled down through the water like golden raindrops drifting around Mo Xi. The glow grew brighter and brighter, as if a glittering storm was falling between heavens and earth. That sweet rainfall misted down in a gentle drizzle. The world was at peace.

Within that soft veil of rain, Mo Xi saw a silhouette slowly emerge. He stiffened in shock.

The figure strode toward him with an easy grace, his blue and gold merit ribbon fluttering on his forehead. As he drew closer, Mo Xi could see

his handsome, youthful face, his dazzling smile, his black eyes, his unmarred body. Beaming at Mo Xi, he walked out from the depths of the lake.

Gu Mang…

Mo Xi, who thought he'd never know pain again, who thought he had no more attachments, felt a sob wrung from his throat. *It's Gu Mang…*

But this Gu Mang wasn't the same man who fell into the lake. He looked as he had more than ten years ago, the first time they had reunited on the battlefield, when Gu-shixiong had stepped away from the bonfire and reached out toward the lonely boy Mo Xi had been.

"Shixiong…" Mo Xi rasped, the rims of his eyes red.

Is it you? Is it your shade, your soul? Or is this merely a final hallucination before I die?

There was no answer. The vision of Gu Mang walked up to him, just like he had all those years ago, just like when they were young. He reached for Mo Xi's hand, murmuring softly to his lover sinking deeper into the water. "Mo Xi, we're home."

The war has ended. It's all over. Let's go home.

We've come home.

Chapter 195:
Grand Finale

Mo Xi, we're home.

These soft words, full of finality, lulled Mo Xi into slumber, then woke him from it.

He didn't know how much time had passed when he heard the patter of rain. A faint voice floated above the murmur of the water, singing softly. Though he could make out neither the tune nor the words, he felt this melody was grand and melancholy, like nothing he'd ever heard before—as if it'd come from the time of primordial chaos.

"Come home… When will they come home…"

He caught the words in blurry snatches. His lashes fluttered, and he slowly opened his eyes.

Mo Xi was surrounded by endless cold mist. A fine drizzle fell from the heavens and onto his cheeks, but it didn't feel wet. The drops seemed to disappear into nothingness the moment they touched his skin. Everything seemed to flicker and sway.

He blinked. Was this the underworld?

Looking around, he discovered he was lying in a dilapidated little boat. Someone sat near him, gazing at the reeds on the distant banks, cheek in hand. The moment Mo Xi glimpsed his face, he bolted upright, blood rushing to his head. "Gu Mang?"

At the sound of his voice, Gu Mang turned and flashed a smile. "You're awake."

Mo Xi felt like he'd taken a heavy blow; the pain in his chest turned into stinging at the rims of his eyes. Endless emotions surged up in his throat, but he couldn't say a word. He sat in the little boat, wanting to get a look at his surroundings, but his eyes refused to leave Gu Mang's face for even a moment.

Perhaps sensing Mo Xi's tumultuous emotions, Gu Mang rose from the prow of the boat and stepped over to sit beside him. He took Mo Xi's hands in his own.

Mo Xi's thoughts juddered. He lowered his lashes, and Gu Mang reached out to fold him into his arms. "It's okay. Everything's over now."

It's all over. You've endured too much suffering; you've tasted too much torment. Now, it's all finally over.

Mo Xi wrapped his arms tightly around Gu Mang. The mist on the river was thick; they couldn't see anything clearly. All that was real was the person in front of him; he could touch him, could be at his side.

"You're still alive," Mo Xi choked out.

Gu Mang drew back. Patting Mo Xi on the shoulder, he grimaced. "Yes, still alive. But once this boat reaches its destination, it'll be time to go."

"This is…"

"This is the soul-river of the underworld," Gu Mang answered. "We are both already…"

He fell silent, but Mo Xi understood. One of them had died in the demonic blood sea, while the other had chosen mutual destruction with the undying heart of the Demonblood Beast. They'd both gone to the Yellow Springs and reunited upon this soul-river where the calm waters ran deep.

Mo Xi slowly gathered himself from within his earlier shock and turmoil. He gazed into Gu Mang's blue eyes, heavy sorrow filling his heart. Yes, they were both dead. But Gu Mang could still reincarnate, while he…

He lowered his lashes, hiding this secret that flashed across his mind. His souls would scatter and leave the wheel of reincarnation, just as the god of the Reversal Stone had told him. But he didn't want Gu Mang to learn of this. This final stretch of time was all that was left of his and Gu Mang's lives. Seeing each other like this, one last time, was a show of mercy from the heavens; he didn't want it to be spent in sadness. All along, it had been Gu Mang who'd hidden secrets in exchange for Mo Xi's peace. This time, Mo Xi thought, it was his turn to comfort Gu Mang. He wished for Gu

Mang to reincarnate with no attachments or regrets—to have a carefree and easy next life.

“I’m sorry. I dragged you down to this place.” Gu Mang gazed at Mo Xi, pained. “I still couldn’t protect you properly in the end.”

Mo Xi gave him a wan smile, his voice low and a little hoarse. “I chose it myself.”

River water splashed softly against the boat’s prow.

“Gu Mang, I should thank you. If it weren’t for you in the beginning, I might’ve become a despicable person after the Mo Clan fell from grace, controlled by ambition and hatred like Murong Chen or Hua Po’an. Thank you—you were the one who saved me.”

Gu Mang smiled and patted his cheek. “You never would have. I didn’t save you—I only saw the kindness in your heart. That was why I was willing to watch over you and to stay by your side, no matter what happened with your family.” He paused, and the light in his blue eyes glimmered. His voice softened, and he pressed his forehead to Mo Xi’s. “I was willing to love you.”

Neither of them spoke again. The drizzle whispered down upon the soul-river, enclosing them in its warm glow. The two of them had loved each other half their lives, yet they’d never been able to stay with each other for long. It was only in this boat, heading toward the resting place of dead souls, that they finally interlaced their fingers, confessing everything with no regard for past or future.

“Mo Xi, I’ve always loved you.”

“Me too.”

“I’ve always wanted to be with you.”

That conversation from what felt like many years ago resurfaced on the road to the Yellow Springs. As Mo Xi broke into a smile, his voice grew husky and bitter. “Me too.”

“Only you.”

“Mn.”

“It would be nice if all my next lives had you in them.”

This time Mo Xi said nothing. He knew he wouldn’t get a next life, but when he looked into Gu Mang’s clear azure eyes, the agony that surged into his heart was accompanied by equally intense tenderness and adoration. After a long moment, he smiled and gazed into Gu Mang’s eyes. He spoke, voice slightly pinched. “They will.”

I’m sorry. I’ve hardly ever lied to you. But I have to trick you, this very last time. Gu Mang, I wish you well.

“We’ll see each other again.”

The boat drifted onward. The mist was dense, with a hazy light flashing through it. Suddenly, they heard clamorous shouting from its depths. Mo Xi jumped, but Gu Mang said, “Don’t worry, I heard this earlier, too. It’s nothing dangerous—look into the fog…”

Mo Xi turned and caught sight of other boats wavering indistinctly in the mist. When he looked closer, what he saw astonished him: Boats covered the soul-river’s surface as far as the eye could see. In each sat a soldier wearing Chonghua’s old battle armor—exactly the kind of uniform the men had worn when Gu Mang had been a great general of Chonghua.

Gradually, Mo Xi realized that those faces were familiar. They were smudged with blood, some very young, barely out of boyhood. They gazed back in the direction from which they had come, eyes solemn.

Mo Xi heard drumbeats rumbling out of the mist, heard the low and grave song of Chonghua’s army echo over the surface of the soul-river. Tens of thousands of voices converged into a steady flow, overpowering the faint soul-farewell song that emanated from the depths of the reeds.

“Our sons went forth with swords held brave, their blood and bones in distant grave. Last year this self was yet intact, last night this body spoke and laughed. Your loyalty I safely keep, your valiant deeds I freely speak. For when these heroes’ souls come home, throughout the land shall peace be known.”

The instant he recognized it, Mo Xi could no longer hold back his tears. They fell and disappeared without a trace, like the rain on this passage

to the Yellow Springs.

“Before you woke up, this boat stopped for a long time,” Gu Mang said softly. “The Yellow Springs rain fell, and this mist rose. Visions of the people I cherished most in life appeared in the mist, looking as they did when they passed through this place. I saw the brothers who lost their lives at Phoenix Cry Mountain. I saw Lu Zhanxing. When Zhanxing departed, he was restless. He sat on the deck, sticking his head over the side to peer into the river.” Gu Mang chuckled hoarsely. “I saw Auntie Lin…my mother… she kept looking back, her cheek in her hand. I knew she was thinking of me…”

As he spoke, tears rolled soundlessly down his cheeks. He carelessly dashed them away. Forcing a smile, he continued, “I even saw my—my cousin…”

He wanted to tell Mo Xi about Murong Chuyi, but he couldn’t go on. His life had contained too much suffering—his family had passed on; his friends had scattered. Only at the very end, on the way to the Yellow Springs, could he reunite with their shades.

“Mo Xi, I saw them all. I didn’t expect I’d be able to see them again at the end, I…” Mo Xi could hear the quaver in Gu Mang’s voice. He turned toward him; Gu Mang was looking downward, but Mo Xi could see the rims of his eyes were red. “I was very happy.”

Those comrades and brothers sailing through the thick mist, those shades of the heroes who’d died in battle at Phoenix Cry Mountain, were singing the empire’s song for martyred souls, filling this cold, wide, desolate river’s surface with its solemn sound.

Mo Xi reached out, pulling Gu Mang into his arms. He looked up at the crimson sky and softly said, “It’s over now. I’ll stay with you for this last stretch of the journey.”

The rain gradually tapered off; bars of faint golden sunlight shone through the heavy clouds, dispelling the cold of the Yellow Springs soul-river. “I’ll stay with you, Gu Mang,” Mo Xi murmured. “We still have our next lives, we still have the future…”

He closed his eyes, swallowing thickly.

So this was how it felt to hide such a dark secret in one’s heart in order to comfort someone, to keep him company, to hope he would enjoy the bliss of ignorance. Though it had been only a scant few moments for Mo Xi, he felt like his insides were being cut apart. Yet Gu Mang had endured this feeling for almost ten years. More than three thousand days and nights.

His heart ached unbearably. He lowered his head and kissed Gu Mang’s temple again and again. They didn’t say anything anymore—or perhaps there was nothing left that needed to be said. It was enough that they could stay with each other, tightly holding each other’s hands. They’d never yearned for much else.

As they continued their voyage, side by side, a familiar figure rose out of the mist, standing at the prow of his boat with his hands clasped behind his back. Mo Xi’s heart began to pound. “Father?!” he blurted.

Mo Qingchi’s shade was reflected on the misty water of the Yellow Springs. At last, Mo Xi saw how his father had left the mortal realm many years ago. Mo Qingchi appeared here as heroic and kindly as he was in Mo Xi’s memories. Like Gu Mang’s mother, he looked back the way he’d come, but his expression was calm and peaceful. Worry still touched his brow as he thought of his child in the human world, that Little Fireball. But he knew the spirit beast he’d left behind would protect his son, Mo Xi.

Letting out a long sigh, Mo Qingchi murmured to himself, “I hope you can walk a path with a clear conscience.”

“Father… Father…” Mo Xi at last found his voice, hoarse with sobs as he called out to him. The seven-year-old Fireball had never gotten to welcome his papa home, but now, he finally had a chance to see him again.

Whether out of sheer coincidence or for some deeper reason, Mo Qingchi’s shade gazed across time toward Mo Xi and Gu Mang’s boat. He smiled faintly. “Little Fireball, Papa can’t stay with you anymore. But Papa will always protect you…”

Mo Xi stared at him in amazement. Perhaps, when Mo Qingchi had sailed this stretch of the soul-river on his boat, he’d also run into the cold

mist of the Yellow Springs. Perhaps he knew that when the mist came, the dead would see those they were attached to in life. That was why he'd…

The boat glided forward and passed through a Yellow Springs waterfall. Mo Xi could no longer hear his father's voice. "Papa!" Mo Xi choked out. Amid the crash of falling water, Mo Qingchi's shade disappeared.

After the waterfall, the world changed. The cold mist disappeared, along with all those apparitions. Gu Mang reached out to reassure Mo Xi, but stiffened in surprise as he glimpsed something out of the corner of his eye. Mo Xi pulled himself out of his sorrow and followed his gaze.

"We're at the end of the Yellow Springs Road…" murmured Gu Mang.

A ferry crossing overgrown with dying grass rose up on the shore ahead of them, with a silty path that stretched into the distance. The path teemed with the dead, and at its end, the city of the underworld loomed on the horizon, an eerie sight beneath the low sky.

The prow of their little boat bumped gently against the sand. The journey of their life had reached its end. Everything was over. Looking back on their life was like looking at the Yellow Springs river behind them. The underworld river flowed into the east, the dead like its running waters, never to return whence they came.

"Let's go." Gu Mang rose, gripping Mo Xi's hand. He stepped out of the boat, then turned back with a smile. "We still have our next life."

"Yes," said Mo Xi. "We still have our next life."

He held tight to Gu Mang's hand, caressing that familiar palm, swallowing that very last secret.

Together, they stepped ashore.

Their berth was different from others; beside the spot where their little boat ran aground, there sat a man wearing a bamboo hat. As they stepped onto the sandy banks, the man rose. Presuming he had merely gotten tired on the Yellow Springs Road and had sat down to rest, neither

Mo Xi nor Gu Mang paid him much mind. Yet as they made their way forward, that man called out after them. “Gentlemen, please wait.”

Gu Mang turned. “Hm?”

“Mo Xi, Gu Mang.” The man sighed. “I’ve waited for you for a long time.”

“How do you…” Mo Xi began to ask how he knew their names, but realized he shouldn’t view this mystical place through eyes accustomed to the mortal world. He changed his question. “Sir…who are you?”

The man didn’t immediately respond. He held out his hand before Mo Xi and Gu Mang’s hesitant gazes, palm up, fingers outstretched. In the same instant, they both spied the pitch-black Reversal Stone sitting in the middle of his palm. Unlike before, the stone was glowing with a shimmering white light, as if a new divine power had appeared within it.

Mo Xi raised his head to take a closer look at this man. Only a sliver of his face was visible beneath the bamboo hat. When he saw it, Mo Xi flinched. “It’s *you*? From inside the Reversal Stone—you’re that…” *God who didn’t do anything and left everything up to me.*

The god of the stone’s spiritual form smiled faintly, his clothes fluttering in the breeze of the Yellow Springs. “Yes. I knew you two would end up here. I’ve been waiting for you. This Reversal Stone is the last thing I must give you.”

Gu Mang, sharp as always, narrowed his eyes. “Oh, so you’re that rotten, lying rock god?”

“I guess so.”

“You’ve told all your lies, so what are you doing here? Get out of the way.” Gu Mang, holding reverence for neither god nor demon, didn’t bother with courtesies. “We’re busy with reincarnation.”

“Hold on.” Mo Xi pulled Gu Mang back. He gazed at the god, heart pounding. He realized suddenly that he and Gu Mang were different from the souls around them making their way down the road toward the Yellow Springs. The other souls already resembled ghosts, but he and Gu Mang were still solid, made of flesh and blood. Could it be…?

Hope sparked in Mo Xi's eyes, his emotions surging. The god looked up from the stone and met Mo Xi's gaze. His eyes were calm and gentle as he regarded Mo Xi with a smile. "Reversal Stones *do* exist in this world. And they can truly reverse life and death, reverse dying and pain." That god's voice was low, husky, and warm.

The underworld's scarlet spider lilies swayed on either side of the Yellow Springs Road, vivid as a wildfire.

The god solemnly placed that glimmering Reversal Stone into Mo Xi's hand. "However, I am not the one who can set it alight. Only those who have undertaken its test can do so. The final choice you made convinced the stone to submit to you."

Wind rose, the plants rustled, and the clouds of the Yellow Springs drifted and scattered overhead. The god spoke to the stunned Mo Xi. "You get only one chance to wield the reversal powers of the stone. It belongs to you, Mo Xi."

Gu Mang turned toward Mo Xi. They exchanged a look of astonishment. A splendid sunbeam broke through the clouds, making their eyes dance with light. The next words from the man in the bamboo hat shook away the last of the gloom:

"Make your wish." The little boat anchored at the shore of the soul-river swayed slightly, as if urging Mo Xi to speak. "Mo Xi, let it take the two of you home."

One month later, in the imperial city in Chonghua's capital, Murong Mengze stood in the middle of a white marble floor carved with soaring dragons. Hands clasped primly behind her back, she watched the craftsmen hammering away in their coarse hemp clothes as they toiled to repair the destroyed royal palace.

The dust of that final battle had settled, and Murong Mengze had begun the process of rebuilding. She'd sent the artisans and cultivators to help the civilians rebuild their houses first. Only after Chonghua's residents were housed did she give the order for them to begin repairing the buildings used by the royal family.

The furnaces Murong Chen had once displayed in the throne room were shattered, but the incense burners shaped like gold beasts with two delicate handles on either side were still mumbling with their last breaths: “His Imperial Majesty’s fortune floods the heavens… His Imperial Majesty’s glory fills the realm…”

The craftsmen swept the scraps of the incense burners into the sacks on their poles, then carted them away to be dumped in a wagon and thrown into the wilderness along with the rest of the shattered debris of the old court.

“Glory fills the realm…”

The little golden beast whined and groaned, lying in a pile of matchwood and brick, endlessly repeating its mantra of flattery. It was only an object, after all, ignorant of its fate. Its gilt lacquer had been scraped off in the chaos, exposing the dark black steel beneath it. It was a miserable sight.

Murong Mengze shot a sidelong glance at that wagon laden with junk. When the terrified artisans greeted her, she offered them a warm smile. “Thank you for making the trip here.”

Taken aback yet plainly delighted, the artisans answered her with a chorus of pleasantries.

Murong Mengze was still attired in her customary black robes with golden trim. Alone, she walked away to appraise the progress in the other halls once more. She’d asked the artisans to make them simple and modern.

She of course knew the people of Chonghua felt a good deal of gratitude toward her for her actions. Everything dearly needed repair in the wake of the great battle, and her restraint in exercising imperial power had earned her praise and commendation.

When it came to military achievement, however, the greatest praise went to Jiang Fuli, who had been the most successful in the battle against Liao. He was, after all, the one to defeat Hua Po’an. Murong Mengze hadn’t witnessed their final duel, but the low-level cultivators present had reported that after Hua Po’an lost the power of the Demonblood Beast, he proceeded to fight Jiang Fuli using his nine-eyed qin.

Hua Po’an had invoked eight of the eyes on the qin’s body, which were each in turn defeated by Jiang Fuli—but he never allowed the last eye to open. Some thought the ninth eye must have held some shockingly malevolent technique, one Hua Po’an would avoid using except in the direst straits. But even in those final moments, as Hua Po’an fell beneath Jiang Fuli’s sword, the last eye on the nine-eyed qin remained closed. No one knew what was hidden within that eye. Hua Po’an had never shown it to anyone. It was like a seed buried deep in his heart, one that would never sprout.

“Is Hua Po’an dead?”

Mengze had often heard this question in the streets and alleys, but the answers it garnered were different every time.

“Probably.”

“Yes! I saw Medicine Master Jiang strike him down myself. His vital spirit scattered and turned into dust.”

“But how can we be sure… Didn’t he turn into a demon?”

“Even if he didn’t die, there’s nothing he can do now.”

Murong Mengze thought if anyone knew the answer to this question, it was Jiang Fuli. But no reply from him was forthcoming. Jiang Fuli and Su Yurou had left Chonghua directly after the battle. The medicine master had said he never knew who he was, and all he’d done before had no purpose other than seeking riches. Now, he’d finally accomplished something that was about more than just money. Something that had been done wholly by Jiang Fuli—not Chen Tang, nor a puppet in his likeness. Perhaps this turn of events was what finally allowed him to travel with all of Chen Tang’s memories intact. This time, Su Yurou had no need to seal away his feelings and memories. Perhaps somewhere on the long journey ahead, he would finally find an answer as to what he, Jiang Fuli, wanted in life.

The medicine master wasn’t the only one whose reputation had been dramatically burnished by that final battle: Wangshu-jun, Murong Lian, now enjoyed the adulation of the city. Murong Mengze knew, however, that Murong Lian’s health was unsalvageable—his prolonged ephemera usage

had siphoned years off his life. Besides, he cared for little beyond his own satisfaction. Gaining the people's recognition had fulfilled a long-abiding wish of his, but he'd long since grown weary of the affairs of the capital. When Mengze had called at Wangshu Manor to visit him the previous evening, she'd found him drinking under the foxglove blossoms with the moon overhead. His illusion butterflies had fluttered to and fro in the courtyard, and his holy weapon huqin lay on the stone table beside him.

Murong Lian had finally reconciled the disparate parts of himself. He could summon to his side both the illusion techniques he loved and the music he'd once abhorred.

"Lian-ge, will you really not consider staying in the capital?"

Pulling away from his pipe, Murong Lian shot her an indifferent glance. "No. It's a tiny little capital. This lord finds it claustrophobic, too stuffy to live in."

"So you plan to…?"

"I'll go north, and play around in the fiefdom of my mother's clan."

Murong Mengze pondered this for a moment and smiled. "Whenever Lian-ge gets sick of playing, do remember to come back. I'll keep Wangshu Manor in order for you."

Murong Lian looked at her thoughtfully. Those fluid peach-blossom eyes seemed to see through to the core of her, but Mengze's smile and earnest gaze never faltered.

"That won't be necessary," said Murong Lian. "Linyi is a simple place; it hasn't seen true prosperity in ages. Your gege has had enough of lavish fun. I'd like to accomplish something there in the future."

"What is Lian-ge thinking?"

"It would be nice to establish an academy. What Chen Tang did back in the day was pretty interesting. I've had enough of being a lord; now I want to be a headmaster. Frankly, the thought of getting called Wangshu the Wise all day tickles me."

"But Lian-ge," Murong Mengze said tactfully, "you know the only academy of Chonghua is in the capital. It might be difficult to manage one

elsewhere.”

Murong Lian voiced no objection. He took a pull from his pipe and slowly breathed it out in Murong Mengze’s face. “Forget it, then. I should just work to strengthen the nation. I’ll see if I can quit this drug, live to a ripe old age, and focus on managing Chonghua.”

Murong Mengze laughed. “What does Lian-ge mean by this? Of course you’re going to quit ephemera, and of course you’re going to live to a ripe old age.”

Murong Lian flashed her a grin. “It might be harder than you think.”

Silence fell in the courtyard. The illusion butterflies flitted around them, alighting on Murong Mengze’s shoulders. Mengze glanced at them. “If Lian-ge wants to go, then go. After Chen-ge passed, you’re the acting emperor. If you want to start an academy in Linyi…” She smiled. “There’s nothing I can do to stop you.”

“This academy of mine will accept everyone, regardless of bloodline. It would be too boring otherwise,” said Murong Lian blandly. “What do you think?”

Shockingly, Murong Mengze had not the slightest disagreement with this proposal. “Anything Lian-ge wants,” she said.

When she took her leave, Murong Lian didn’t get up to escort her. It wasn’t until she’d nearly disappeared around the corner of the flower-lined walkway that he knocked the ash out of his pipe and called, “Mengze, when the time comes to return to your true self, just do it.”

Murong Mengze stiffened.

“Once you do, I’ll be second in line. The closest person to the imperial throne was never me. It’s you.”

Murong Mengze didn’t turn her head or respond. Her expression flickered. She wanted to ask, *When did you learn my secret?* Or even, *Why didn’t you mention it sooner?* But those thoughts crowding into her mind were all overturned by Murong Lian’s easy abandonment of the throne. To her, the only thing that mattered was Murong Lian forfeiting his claim. She could let go of everything else. At last, she said, “Many thanks. If you need any assistance with the academy in Linyi, come to me in the capital at any time.”

With that, she turned to leave. Besides Jiang Fuli and Murong Lian, there was no one living who could compete with her in prestige.

Still, the soldiers of Chonghua refused to give up hope. Their General Mo was so powerful—how could he die? Yue Chenqing led the cultivators of the Northern Frontier Army to dredge the great river again and again, but they failed to turn up Mo Xi and Gu Mang's bodies. The two had very likely turned to dust in the blood sea—but the cultivators refused to entertain the notion. They'd rather believe General Mo and General Gu of the Northern Frontier Army might yet be out there, keeping that thin thread of hope alive in their hearts.

On the third day after the battle, one of the soldiers finally fished something up from the great river. It was a luminous jade scroll, transformed from the Shuairan whip. Though there was nothing written in it, its appearance was enough to make the Northern Frontier Army boil over with excitement. They were certain Mo Xi was still alive. Otherwise, how could Shuairan still be glowing?

Murong Mengze sat at her desk within the palace, annotating scrolls. The handmaiden Yue-niang still attended her closely, yet there was a new and fearful hesitation in the girl's eyes when she looked at Mengze.

This handmaiden knew some things that others did not. Recently, Murong Mengze had been invited by her good friend Zhou He for drinks. Though Zhou He was one of the emperor's men, he'd secretly harbored feelings for Mengze for years. Now that Mo Xi was dead, he must have felt he finally had a chance. His invitation for drinks at night was more him testing the waters than proposing a chat between friends.

Yue-niang hadn't expected Murong Mengze to gladly agree. She'd expected even less that Mengze would expressionlessly and without the slightest hesitation slip a dark red pill into Zhou He's cup at dinner. It was a fatal poison that would lie dormant for two months, and then grant the victim a sudden death.

The incident had left Yue-niang's heart in turmoil. Zhou He got along so well with Mengze and had done so much for her; even if Mengze disdained his attentions, was there need to secretly poison him? Was this still the princess she knew?

“Yue-niang.”

At her mistress’s call, Yue-niang startled out of her frightened thoughts with a soft cry. “My lady.”

Mengze pinned her with a thoughtful gaze, watching her for so long Yue-niang’s legs began to tremble. “You’ve been distracted recently,” she said with a smile. “Is something on your mind?”

“N-no…”

“That’s good. If you ever feel unwell, you must tell me. Don’t make me worry.”

“Yes, my lady.”

“Also, I have a task for you.” Mengze unfastened her command token from her waist and handed it to Yue-niang. “Take this token and go find Yue Chenqing. Tell him I want to borrow that jade scroll Xihe-jun left behind.”

Yue-niang acquiesced, and Mengze sent her off with a smile. It was only after her figure disappeared that Mengze’s expression gradually darkened. “Yue-er.” She sighed. “Even you I can’t keep in the end…”

Mengze was left alone in the palace hall. She took an exquisite jade scroll out of her qiankun pouch. It was an item Jiang Yexue had created for Murong Chen. He had been an unparalleled grandmaster artificer; even the most extraordinary cultivators would find it impossible to tell that this jade scroll was a fake. Her neat nails—devoid of cinnabar dye—caressed the golden fastening on the side of the scroll. She understood the dark schemes that were hidden in this counterfeit history-recording scroll. Within it, Murong Chen had fabricated enough slanderous scandals to ruin Mo Xi. Everything had been pieced together from genuine scrolls—it would be hard to tell the difference between truth and lies.

She was ready. Mo Xi had used the Reversal Stone to return to the past. There was a high chance he’d learned of the filthy deeds she’d done. No—it was more than a chance; he must have learned everything. That was surely why he used the holy weapon Shuairan to leave her a jade scroll before he died. That scroll probably smugly revealed how she, Murong Mengze, was no innocent either. He must hate her for exploiting his

gratitude all these years, hate her for scheming against him. Even in death, he had to tell everyone. He might even…

A still more terrifying thought dawned upon Murong Mengze. Her teeth chattered, shivers running down her spine.

What if Mo Xi wasn't dead?

The thought soaked her entire back in cold sweat. She could almost see that man's tall figure, pacing back and forth in the shadows of the palace hall, ready to step out from the darkness and into the light. At any moment, he would stare her down and say, *Mengze, I have a debt to settle with you.*

She shuddered and jolted to her feet, knocking the desk over. "No… *No…*" She ran out of the hall, leaving that eerie, frigid hall behind her.

Distantly, she felt that this was odd. When she'd schemed against Murong Chen, Murong Lian, or Zhou He, she hadn't felt anything like this kind of panic—it was only in this battle of wits with Mo Xi and Gu Mang. Inside her cold, hardened heart was a kernel of self-loathing, and this, the source of her fear.

Among all her chess pieces, these two alone were true-hearted war generals whose loyalty to their nation had never wavered. She'd stained her hands with such pristine blood. This was her stain of filth, a mark she saw whenever she bowed her head and looked inward. She would never be able to wash it off.

"M-my lady."

Someone softly called to her. Mengze snapped her head up and saw that Yue-niang had returned. She stood at the bottom of the steps, gazing fearfully up at her mistress. When she caught sight of Mengze's bloodless face, the nervous Yue-niang jumped in fright.

Trembling, Yue-niang ascended the steps and held out a brocade box. "Th-this is the jade scroll y-you asked for…"

Mengze willed herself to calm, suppressing her fury, terror, and guilt. "Oh…you're back so soon?"

"Yes…"

“Thank you. You can wait outside.”

She accepted the jade scroll Mo Xi left behind. Mengze closed her eyes and retraced her steps to the palace hall. The cavernous hall was cold and empty save for herself. Mengze locked the door, then turned her anxious, unwilling gaze upon that wordless scroll.

She was certain he’d left this for her. Just as she’d thought, when she opened the scroll with her own hands, pale golden text appeared on the originally blank surface—Mo Xi’s elegant handwriting.

She trembled with hatred. *That’s right…just as expected!* Mo Xi would seek recompense for everything, down to the last pound of flesh; he would never let her off—

But in the next moment, she froze. The text on the jade scroll had sharpened. Written in the beautiful script she knew so well, there were only two sentences.

The stain of your guilt can be cleansed with the remainder of your life. It is my hope that you do not follow in Murong Chen’s footsteps.

Murong Mengze reeled as if she’d been struck; her ears rang. What… what was he saying?

He knew all there was to know of her dark schemes, yet after what he’d been through, he understood that the one on the throne was rarely unsullied. The path to the top was dyed with blood and slaughter. Some who wronged those around them on their journey, once they sat upon the throne, could still reform the world and govern with benevolence.

Was that true?

She had once been named one of Chonghua’s three gentlemen, Virtue, Wisdom, and Mind. It’d been an empty title, and yet Mo Xi had written nothing of vengeance. She might have been false to those around her, but her virtue with regard to Chonghua might have been genuine.

It is my hope that you do not follow in Murong Chen’s footsteps.

Mengze looked at those last few words without seeing them. After a long time, she lowered her head.

Do not follow in Murong Chen's footsteps…

She picked up her counterfeit history-recording jade scroll and looked at it closely. Then she channeled power into her fingertips and pinched it to dust.

Mengze collapsed back onto the throne as if a weight had been lifted. She looked up as the sweat on her back gradually cooled. The merciless battle she expected had ended before it had even begun. She stared at the ceiling, the snarling totems of dragons and tigers carved on the roofbeams reflected in her dark eyes. Her fingers gripped the armrests of the throne, slowly caressing it.

It is my hope that you do not follow in Murong Chen's footsteps.

She closed her eyes, a bitter smile tugging at the corners of her mouth.

Mo Xi. You really were…

She didn't complete the thought. She sat alone in the brand-new palace hall she'd personally commissioned. There were a thousand things still to be done. Right now it was still and silent, but a new dynasty would soon be unveiled. Her heart thundered, rousing the war-drums hidden in her chest for so many years, like endless waves beating against the shore.

She'd been stained in blood and filth. Yet the long-awaited light of the imperial Ziwei Star was finally shining upon her fate.

It was the height of spring—willow boughs bent low, grasses stretched skyward, and birds fluttered from branch to branch.

Two months had elapsed since Murong Lian bade farewell to Murong Mengze and departed the capital. Presently, he was strolling along a riverbank in Linyi. He carried a willow branch he'd broken off, letting it swish slowly beside him as he walked.

The academy was under construction, set to be completed roughly at the end of next year. In the past few days, he'd been more than idle; he was free as a bird, his plate completely clear.

But he did have many secrets to digest, the first of which concerned Murong Mengze. She was now Chonghua's acting emperor, though some inflexible, conservative old nobles continued to mock her as unworthy of the throne on account of her gender. Murong Lian knew that very soon—once public opinion of Mengze had reached its peak—she would reveal a secret she had hidden for thirty years. Chonghua would surely scorn her then, but he was betting Murong Mengze would be the final victor. This woman…no, this *person* was too formidable indeed. Ordinary people were no match for her.

For the two months she'd been managing the court—merely as the acting emperor—she'd worked hard to strengthen the nation, taking the opportunity while the most powerful noble clans were split and weakened to enact a series of new decrees. She'd posthumously elevated Gu Mang and Mo Xi to martyred heroes with the highest honors. She made plans to fulfill Gu Mang's lifelong wish of abolishing slavery and opening the academy's doors to all. This new academy would accept disciples based on spiritual foundation and innate talent, regardless of their status at birth. She also enacted new laws to prohibit harsh governance, eliminate the appointment of extraneous family members to official sinecures, ease the financial burdens on the working class, and listen to the voices of the people.

In the eyes of commoners, how important would the stains on her reputation be beside these great achievements?

Murong Mengze… Murong Mengze…

Murong Lian said the name to himself a few times and couldn't help snorting with laughter. Murong Mengze, ninth son of the imperial family. His mother feared he would be murdered by the empress in his infancy, so she colluded with a former elder of Shennong Terrace to hide his true sex with medicine. Murong Chen had spent a lifetime wary of Murong Lian, but it seemed he'd focused on the wrong person. The prophesied "strife among siblings and disharmony between brothers" didn't indicate Murong Lian at all, but rather Princess Mengze, whom he'd always thought to be his little sister.

At this thought, Murong Lian laughed harder. Murong Mengze was capable of lying dormant for almost thirty years as a woman, capable of deceiving the world for the prize of the throne—how vicious he was. Possessed of such a ruthless character, there was no one who could hope to deprive him of what he wanted.

Thankfully, Murong Lian hadn't known this secret for long. He'd only learned it during the time he'd been unconscious in Murong Mengze's care. Given Mengze's prodigious talents, with a little more time, Murong Lian was sure the matter of him impersonating a princess for so many years would soon be rarely mentioned. And as for those secret scandals known to so few, they would eventually be ground to dust by the passage of time.

Wangshu Manor remained as it was, standing ready should Murong Lian ever return. Xihe Manor, in contrast, had been repurposed into a house of mercy on Housekeeper Li Wei's orders, used to shelter the poor and homeless until they could stand on their own two feet. Li Wei said that if Xihe-jun were still alive, he would be glad to see it.

Yue Chenqing stayed in the capital, but handed over to Jiang Fuli all of the mechanism diagrams Murong Chuyi had drawn in his lifetime. He hoped Jiang Fuli would take them far away from those who would misuse them.

"Blades wielded by the kind are used for protection, while those wielded by the evil become tools for slaughter," he'd said. "Fourth Uncle wouldn't want his diagrams to fall into the hands of those without benevolence, so I ask Medicine Master Jiang to choose somewhere safe to seal these away."

Jiang Fuli sealed Murong Chuyi's diagrams beneath the divine haitang tree on Chen Tang's immortal island, that sacred tree that had begun to gain sentience. The tree was righteous by nature, and had long gained the ability to tell good from evil. There could be no safer place to entrust Murong Chuyi's last wishes than with this silent guardian. Perhaps in decades or centuries, or even a millennium, another grandmaster artificer with a heart as kind as Murong Chuyi's might emerge in the mortal world, capable of carrying on his legacy of boundless compassion.

These people had grand ideals. Murong Lian did not. He was an ordinary man with countless flaws. He was no hero, nor did he care much about things outside his control. At the moment, he merely wanted to build his own academy, and teach his incoming disciples the Six Virtues, Six Arts, and Six Teachings that all gentlemen must master.

Maybe he would end up with a student like Chen Tang, or Hua Po'an. There was much he couldn't plan for, but there was one thing he could ensure—in fact, he'd made it the first doctrine of his academy. All students would be taught according to their aptitude. As the headmaster, he would never let those whose talent lay in illusion techniques be forced to cultivate with the qin.

It was good to be in charge. Murong Lian sighed with satisfaction. He brushed some dust from his robes and coughed before moseying his way home. When he passed through the bustling market streets, he spied an old man selling meat pies. They were crisp and golden brown, calling to mind those famous pastries at the northern frontier.

Murong Lian glanced at the stall and stopped. "Hey, old man—get me a pie."

"All righty!"

Murong Lian seemed to hesitate for a moment. "Make it two."

Delighted, the old man scooped up two golden brown and crispy pies to hand to him.

But Murong Lian didn't leave. He stood for a while longer before adding with great reluctance, "Never mind. Give me three."

The old man blinked.

With three piping hot pastries in hand, Murong Lian made his way home. He'd merely bought them because it was convenient, he told himself. He hadn't been thinking of anyone in particular. He wasn't thinking of them as family. Not at all.

Regardless of how Murong Lian disdained them, there were two people secretly living in his house. They'd come to call on the third day he arrived in Linyi and scared him half to death. If their old friends from the

capital heard these two were still alive… Murong Lian scoffed. Who knew what might follow.

He strolled the whole way home. When he pushed open the door, he found someone in the corridor, moving a little stool into place so he could hang up a colorful lantern.

The man wore robes of blue and white, his long hair tied high on his head. He was grinning from ear to ear, his skin the healthy gold of barley, his features handsome and sweet. When he heard Murong Lian entering, he lowered his long lashes and looked at him in the flickering lanternlight. His black eyes glittered like the dazzling night sky.

Murong Lian gnashed his teeth in frustration. “Gu Mang, could you have some self-awareness? You’re a guest hiding in *my* manor! Who gave you the right to change the decor?”

The man busy hanging flower lanterns in the hall was none other than the General Gu whom everyone had presumed dead, Gu Mang.

Before Gu Mang could reply, another man emerged from the hall. He was tall and elegantly handsome, his skin as pale and clear as ice, also wearing the rough-spun cloth robes of commoners. Who else could this man be but Mo Xi, whose whereabouts were unknown?

Mo Xi was holding a newly made lantern. He handed it to Gu Mang, who grinned as he reached over from his perch on the chair. “Thanks, Mo-shidi.”

“You’re welcome.”

Murong Lian fumed. “You two really think this is your own home, don’t you?”

“Yep, Lian-di.”

“Gu Mang, are you tired of living?!”

“You’re going to be a headmaster soon. We’ve come to help you teach your disciples. Even if we use fake names, we still have all our skills. You’re getting them for a bargain. We’re family, after all.” Gu Mang hung up the lantern and hopped down from the stool, ducking as Murong Lian

took a swing at him. “Hey we’re all family here, so if you have something to say, say it nicely, all right?”

“Who’s your family?! Who’s going to speak nicely to you?!”

Gu Mang cackled and dashed away down the corridor.

Mo Xi stood speechlessly watching the two of them, a slight grimace on his face. Perhaps when people said survivors of great tragedy got a new lease on life, this was what they meant.

When Mo Xi chose to die with the Demonblood Beast, he’d been prepared for eternal damnation. The god of the Reversal Stone had told him his soul was doomed to scatter on the wind, forever excluded from the wheel of reincarnation. He’d never expected a trip down the Yellow Springs Road would result in a chance to return to life.

The god of the Reversal Stone hadn’t been as powerless as everyone thought. Even if he was merely a flickering remnant of the deity that created the stone, saving the lives of a few mortals posed no challenge—especially when their bodies were still full of the potent spiritual energy of both spirit and demon beasts.

But to attain the Reversal Stone’s salvation, the mortals in question had to save themselves. Only those who redeemed their own hearts and passed the Reversal Stone’s trial would gain its protection and be brought ashore. It could reverse wounds, reverse pain, reverse a heart that had been destroyed, reverse eyes that had paled to azure blue, even reverse death itself. This was the show of remorse, and the recompense given, by the god of the Reversal Stone to the chosen tool of fate.

At the end of the soul-river, on the Yellow Springs Road, Mo Xi had taken the Reversal Stone, which glowed with divine light. He’d made his wish and asked it to complete the last step of its mission on earth. Its magic had made Gu Mang’s body hale and whole again, as if he’d never undergone black magic tempering. It had restored both Mo Xi and Gu Mang’s lives, and only waited to send them wherever they wanted.

“Where do you wish to go?”

In the mist and rumbling echoes of the realm in the Reversal Stone, Mo Xi and Gu Mang—reunited after untold calamity—looked at each other.

Gu Mang grinned. “I’ll go wherever you go. Gu Mang-gege will never trick you again.”

It’s all over. I’m no longer a spy, a traitor, or even a general. I’m no one but Gu Mang—your Gu-shixiong, your Gu Mang-gege. I only need to protect you; I only need to stay with you.

Where they wanted to go was, of course, away from the capital. The capital’s hegemony would sustain itself for thousands of years, the city plagued by schemes and manipulations. Now that the Liao Kingdom’s army had retreated, Chonghua welcomed a long-lasting peace. Mo Xi had thrown the Shuairan jade scroll into the river to tell Mengze one thing: He had no interest in vengeance or conflict, but he would always be watching—watching what Chonghua would become in the hands of its new ruler.

Murong Mengze had not yet proven himself unworthy of this opportunity. He was by no means a pure-hearted idealist, but his goals and Murong Chen’s had never aligned. Murong Chen yearned to rule as the supreme overlord of the Nine Provinces, while Murong Mengze sought to be known as a virtuous ruler and a wise monarch. He would commit unscrupulous deeds in service of his ambition, but he would also exhaust himself for this goal, devoting his entire life to his cause. That was enough.

In the end, they chose to go to Linyi. It wasn’t a particularly prosperous place, but they’d heard Murong Lian had chosen to establish an academy there, a new school that would accept everyone, regardless of background. Gu Mang had been delighted. Aside from Mo Xi, Murong Lian was the person closest to him. He was his family by blood. Gu Mang couldn’t be happier with the choice Murong Lian had made.

Now, Mo Xi stood in the courtyard, watching Gu Mang and Murong Lian chase each other around like children. The foxglove blossoms drifted down in a lilac waterfall, filling the courtyard with their sweet scent.

Vengeance had faded, and achievements, too, were distant memories. In truth, neither Mo Xi nor Gu Mang cared much for the honors Murong Mengze had bestowed on them. Their earliest wishes had already come

true. An era of equality would begin, and they'd kept that first promise between them: They had a home together.

Tomorrow, he and Gu Mang would go to the academy Murong Lian built to take a look and walk around. Perhaps soon afterward, they would appear in front of those young and childish juniors with new names and faces, and teach them about the righteous path and about benevolence, about the purpose behind casting spells and wielding weapons.

Everything was changing for the better in the wake of those turbulent waves. Many years in the future, the imperial court might decline or dissolve, and the world might sink into chaos once more. But just as Chen Tang had chosen to die with a demon, and as Mo Xi and Gu Mang had thrown themselves into a sea of blood to preserve the realm, so long as there was darkness, there would also be light. The kindness and strength of humanity was a seed that would never wither, one that would awaken and sprout even in the harshest conditions. Throughout turbulent eras and prosperous years, brave heroes and brilliant artists had always come from nothing, and they would all eventually be buried beneath nameless grasses. When the currents of time had rushed by and the storm clouds had rolled past to leave the skies clear, all that passion and spilled blood would be remembered as no more than a few sentences in a book.

Human lives were small and fleeting; a person's hard work and sacrifice were rarely carved into eternal remembrance. But the sun would always shine again, driving away the long dark of night. Living in peace was perhaps the greatest tribute future generations could give in honor of the shades of those unsung heroes.

In the courtyard, Gu Mang had been cornered. He let out a shout, laughing. "Mo Xi! C'mere and help me out! Lian-di is being a brat!"

"Who are you calling your di?" raged Murong Lian. "This lord was born first!"

"I was conceived before you!"

"Stop right there, Gu Mang! Get the hell out of my house!"

"Mo Xi, c'mere! Help me beat him up!"

Mo Xi gazed downward, his thick lashes fanning over his cheekbones. He smiled and started forward. “Sure, I’m coming.”

The foxglove tree swayed against the white-washed wall. The beauty of the mortal world was once again in splendid bloom. The Liao Kingdom was defeated, and their soldiers had surrendered. The nation that had once been part of Chonghua was returned to its oversight and designated a vassal territory. As for its dark magic, it was sealed away. Those demonic weapons stained with blood and sin would not again be so easily created, and those black magic techniques would not be so easily taught.

Mo Xi knew it wouldn’t last forever. But at the very least, they’d ushered in a peace worthy of their martyred heroes.

In the little courtyard, the black dog Fandou, whom Murong Lian had brought from the capital, charged at them. Barking exuberantly and wagging his tail, he gamboled around the trio. In this city that had not yet attained its future prosperity, kitchen smoke rose from the houses of Linyi and floated toward the horizon. The rays of the setting sun touched a picture of lovely serenity.

“Don’t even think about it, Fireball!” shouted Murong Lian. “This is a fight between brothers—you’re no man if you intervene!”

Gu Mang hopped up to hook an arm around Murong Lian’s neck and laughed. “How about this? Mo Xi can be on my side, and Fandou can be on yours.”

The prospect excited Fandou, who put his paws on Murong Lian’s knees and stared at him with huge, liquid eyes, tongue lolling.

A gale of laughter drifted out of the courtyard. At last they had a home, a family, somewhere to stay and put down roots. They could stand guard over this hard-won peace, watch spring come and the flowers bloom, see winter’s arrival and the first fall of snow.

Before them stretched years of tranquil days like these—the tinkling of bells from trade caravans in the distance and moonlight to guide the fishermen home, a peace that spanned from the northernmost sands of the desert to the southernmost reaches of the great rivers, on and on, into the boundless future.

Chapter 196:
Beyond the Finale

The Academy's Construction

THE FIRST ACADEMY in Chonghua to accept all students regardless of their birth was built in Linyi and named Wangshu Academy.

Murong Lian's influence featured prominently in the academy's design—it was a space filled with fluttering petals, dancing butterflies, and long, meandering walkways. Translucent drapes hung everywhere, swaying lazily in the wind. Viewed from above, the academy spanned half of a wooded mountain and looked as if it had been built within the misty realm of clouds, like a dream that had come drifting out of the end of a pipe.

The headmaster of the academy had an eccentric disposition and a capricious temperament. During the academy's construction, Murong Lian had popped over for visits at every opportunity, providing his thoughts and opinions on any and all matters.

"Make the Music Pavilion smaller! Why is it so big? Trust me, there aren't that many people who like music cultivation. Yes, that's what I said, shrink the Music Pavilion and enlarge the Illusions Terrace."

"Wangshu-jun," the frightened foreman answered. "There's a hill next to the Illusions Terrace. It can't be enlarged."

"So what? Blow it up."

"…There's another hill beside that one."

"Blow that one up too!"

"There's a little village beside the hill that's beside the other hill."

"Blow it—oh wait, that won't do." Pipe dangling from his mouth, Murong Lian yanked the blueprints closer and swept an imperious eye over the designs. "All right, whatever. The Illusions Terrace can be that size for now. It's fine."

The foreman blinked. *You can understand the blueprints while holding them upside down?*

Mo Xi felt nothing but disdain for Murong Lian's behavior. The first time he entered the academy, he'd expected to be inspired by a school that took in all learners and imagined he'd be faced with a sense of duty and fulfillment upon meeting those keen and questing eyes. But after accompanying Murong Lian on a visit to the mountain to watch the craftsmen at work, all he saw was the headmaster making a bunch of nonsensical requests.

"The Headmaster's Hall must be unique. It can't look like the one in the capital's academy—I don't want a single brick copied from there."

"The garden grounds must be unique as well. They should be huge and full of winding paths so the disciples can flirt in privacy—yes, you heard me, that's what young people should be getting up to. Remember to plant a lot of foxglove trees; they're pretty."

"Make sure to leave enough space to put up canopy drapes. I want you to build outdoor corridors that connect all nine halls. Why? No reason in particular, I just don't like being in the sun."

Gu Mang was flabbergasted. "Have you calculated the costs? Can we afford all this?"

"What are you afraid of?" said Murong Lian. "If we can't, we'll get the money from Mengze. The more flamboyantly wasteful I am, the more spartan and saintly he'll look. He'll love that. Trust me, I wouldn't know how to be emperor, but I've perfected the art of wastrel lordling."

He took a drag from his pipe. Gu Mang snatched it away before he could take another. He hid the pipe behind his back and beamed at Murong Lian. "You agreed to take ten puffs a day. You've had your ten—you can have more tomorrow."

Murong Lian gaped at him, then turned to Mo Xi. "Mo Xi, pass me the candied fruit."

Mo Xi took in Murong Lian's scowling face and produced a package of candied fruit from his qiankun pouch. This was a trifle from Jiang Fuli: It

could suppress Murong Lian's cravings. He handed it to Gu Mang, who smiled, grabbed the back of Murong Lian's head, and shoved it into his mouth.

"This tastes awful!" Murong Lian sputtered.

"It'll make you live longer." Gu Mang grinned. "My dearest headmaster, you ought to focus on your health."

"Get lost!"

Day by day, the academy came to life, turning their old dreams into reality. For Murong Lian, this academy fulfilled his dream of taking control of his own life. Here, everyone's interests were respected, and they could all choose the path that they wished to walk.

For Mo Xi, the academy gave him and Gu Mang a rightful claim to their new identities. It became a home they shared, as well as the future of which they'd dreamed in those destitute years in the army.

For Gu Mang, Wangshu Academy meant even more. Once upon a time, he and Mo Xi had walked along a dike in the slanting light of dusk. He'd plucked a blade of foxtail grass, flicking it across the meadows. At that time, he'd silently accepted the feelings Mo Xi had expressed for him, while harboring his own spark of pathetic yearning. He wished—delusionally, he'd thought—that someday in the future the two of them could share a lasting companionship despite the disparity in their status.

Once upon a time, he'd laughed with Lu Zhanxing as they split a jug of kumis wine around the bonfire. When he'd talked with Lu Zhanxing, a blaze had burned in his heart. He'd hoped this flame in his chest could become a wildfire that cleared away the world's brambles and weeds.

Once upon a time, when he was a little slave in Wangshu Manor, he'd had a burning dream—he'd hoped there'd come a day when everyone would be equal, no matter the circumstances of their birth. He'd hoped that people without a drop of hero's blood would still be respected, that every flower's seeds could sprout and grow.

Now, that fertile soil was finally theirs.

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Drinking in the Starry Night

WANGSHU ACADEMY was completed in the second year after Mo Xi and Gu Mang began their new lives incognito. That night, Gu Mang was drinking wine beneath the starry sky when he heard the sound of billowing cloth and a familiar deep voice from behind him.

“It’s late. What are you doing out here?”

Gu Mang turned. Mo Xi had leapt up with qinggong, floating like a kite before landing lightly on the ink-dark tiles.

This was the tallest building in Wangshu Academy, known as Wangyue Tower. It had quickly become one of Gu Mang’s favorite spots. In the past two years, as Mo Xi and Gu Mang had watched the cultivation academy spring up from the ground—like a beauty applying her makeup, gradually attaining delicate features and exquisite details, manifesting in concrete form the lines in the blueprints—their hearts had become more and more at peace. Linyi was far from the capital. Tales of the nobles’ infighting reached them here and there, but by the time such stories completed the long journey, they were so faded they seemed as moonlight spilling onto the windowsill, or wind blowing past their ears. They could smell the faint scent of blood in the air, but it had nothing much to do with them. The capital’s squabbles took place in a realm separated from them by a veil. When night fell over the Nine Provinces, one side of the veil glimmered with power and wealth, while the other was filled with the warm bustle of domestic life.

Gu Mang lounged on the roof tiles, a warmed jug of pear-blossom white wine at his side. He smiled as he poured Mo Xi a cup. “In two days, the academy will officially open. I was just thinking we have no idea how noisy things will get. Heh—I’m looking forward to it.”

Mo Xi stepped closer, draping the coat he’d brought over Gu Mang’s shoulders before taking a seat beside him. They gazed down together at the sprawling grounds of Wangshu Academy. Gu Mang had his cheek propped

in his hand. “To be honest, whenever I sit up here, I want to laugh every time I look down. Lian-di really spared no expense. Mengze probably hates him. I heard that, to set an example and lower the palace’s operating costs, Mengze even stopped using rare incenses, whereas Lian-di—”

“Wishes for nothing more than to pave the academy’s paths in gold.”

Gu Mang burst out laughing. “It’s not *that* bad, but…” He paused, his long, soft lashes fluttering as he gazed tenderly at Mo Xi beneath the pristine light of the moon. “You’ve finally learned to crack a joke.”

It was awkward yet somehow moving to be studied so closely like this. Mo Xi bent to kiss him, then quickly averted his gaze to stare down at the arching terraces, the towers and pavilions. He looked so serious; but for the faint pink flush on his pale cheeks, it would have been impossible to tell he’d just kissed Gu Mang. He was still so easily embarrassed.

Sighing inwardly, Gu Mang looked at him. Why was it that, no matter how many years passed, no matter how much they’d experienced, his Mo-shidi was still so adorably stuffy? This man had a puddle of sweet honey in his heart, but he hid it away, refusing to let anyone discover it. Even after all these years, Gu Mang could always see the shadow of that pretty youth on Mo Xi, the one from the academy of Chonghua, sitting alone beneath the tree and taking delicate nibbles of his white rice zongzi, his nape soaked with hot sweat from training and his bangs fluttering in the breeze. When that young man turned, his eyes were as pure and clear as the first light of dawn.

Affection welled in his chest. He stretched lazily. “Mo Xi.”

“Hm?”

“I want to count the stars.”

It was clearly not the first time they’d had this conversation. Mo Xi patted him on the head. “Lie down, then.”

Gu Mang lay down on the roof with his head in Mo Xi’s lap, gazing up at the brilliant silver river of the Milky Way. He reached up, feeling the night wind slip through his fingers like silk ribbons. He counted those splendid, dazzling stars. “One, two, three…”

There was a legend that said a new star appeared in the sky whenever a hero passed away. Gu Mang counted the seventy thousand stars that belonged to them. He remembered each and every one of their names, even now.

Mo Xi sat with him, listening to him murmuring those numbers that meant much more. Perhaps, in some far-flung corner of the world, a few of those heroic souls had already reincarnated. Those brothers they'd ridden with, Lu Zhanxing and the others…perhaps they'd one day return to their side. Perhaps they'd become disciples at Wangshu Academy, leaving the darkness of the past and stepping into the beautiful light of the present.

By midnight, the air was chilly, and Gu Mang's pear-blossom white was nearly gone. His voice had faded into a drowsy whisper as he gradually slipped into slumber.

Mo Xi looked down upon his sleeping face. Gu Mang had at last stopped sleeping with a furrow in his brow; his expression betrayed no trace of fear or hurt. But his mouth was still moving—he was still counting the stars.

"You can count them again tomorrow," Mo Xi told him gently. "We still need to prepare some things for the academy's opening in the morning. I'll carry you back."

Gu Mang mumbled his agreement, but continued. "Cousin… Zhanxing…"

Sorrow flickered in Mo Xi's eyes. But that, too, was soon engulfed by endless warmth. He tidied the cups on Gu Mang's behalf, then looked up at the twinkling stars. "They'll see you," he said. "And they'll definitely return to your side."

Soon, more than a thousand disciples would enter the academy, and yet more would join every year. Perhaps they would bear the reincarnated souls of old friends, comrades, and cherished brothers. This time, regardless of their status, regardless of whether they were rich or poor, they would receive equal treatment and patient teaching.

This was paid for with your blood and tears. Will you come back? Will you witness it…?

The night was deep. Gu Mang had finally fallen asleep, and Mo Xi didn't have the heart to wake him. He carefully gathered Gu Mang into his arms. The night wind ruffled Mo Xi's robes as he leapt down from the tower.

Sensing the movement, Gu Mang nuzzled closer into his warm embrace and fell still. Between the vast heavens and earth, the two figures faded into insignificant shadows. He took him home.

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Establishing the Academy

THE DAY BEFORE the academy's official opening, within the Wangshu residence in Linyi, Murong Lian, Mo Xi, and Gu Mang gathered to discuss a matter of grave importance—their titles.

Murong Lian's was not in question; naturally, he would be Headmaster Wangshu. The problem was Mo Xi and Gu Mang. These two couldn't reappear in public with their old identities. Thankfully, disguise techniques posed no difficulty for either of them, but their titles were a subject worthy of discussion.

The three of them talked and argued for a while. Eventually, Murong Lian made the unilateral decision that, upon becoming elders of the academy, Mo Xi would be known as Yaoling-Dongjun, after the god of the easterly sun. Gu Mang would be named Qingguang Elder, after the pure radiance of the moon.

Gu Mang was quite satisfied with his current life, and similarly pleased with this sobriquet. The only one who couldn't abide it seemed to be Mo Xi.

"Why should he go by Qingguang?" Mo Xi narrowed his eyes, staring at Murong Lian with his arms crossed before his chest. "Qingguang

is a variation of Wangshu. What do you mean by this?”

Murong Lian sneered. “What’s the alternative? Should we use a variation of Xihe? Chiwu Elder—the golden crow?”

Gu Mang shook his head. “Sounds terrible. I vote for Qingguang.”

Mo Xi’s eyes widened in disbelief at Gu Mang’s betrayal. “Gu Mang, you—!”

Pleased, Murong Lian reached out to sling an arm around Gu Mang’s shoulders. “Heh, he’s *my* little brother. If he isn’t named after me, should he be named after *you*?”

“That’s not it,” Gu Mang said earnestly. “I just think Qingguang sounds better than Chiwu.”

This made Mo Xi so angry he went through a whole pile of books when he returned, trying to find a variation of Xihe that sounded more elegant. But no matter how much he searched, Wangshu still won. In the end, he threw his hands up in defeat.

Early the next morning, the sun shone brilliantly down over the new academy—a magnificent dawn. Amid the solemn tolling of bells, Wangshu Academy opened its heavy doors carved with celestial motifs. Murong Lian stood on the welcome terrace, painted in red and embellished in gold. Clad in graceful sapphire robes, he gazed down at the young disciples entering the academy. Beside him, Mo Xi and Gu Mang stood shoulder-to-shoulder, the refreshing morning breeze brushing through their hair. They looked just like the elders who had once taught them magic in the imperial academy as they welcomed these brand-new lives, these sparks of potential.

“They’re so *little*.” Gu Mang’s eyes curved into crescents as he smiled. The youngest child beneath the welcome terrace couldn’t have been older than seven or eight. Many had obviously come from poor families. They wore patched clothes of hemp and stumbled in apprehensively, gazing at everything with curiosity and anticipation like tiny cubs venturing out into the forest for the first time. Their new disciples were like a school of little fish that had come pouring in from every lake and ocean, gathering together in this glorious, hard-won pool.

There were no strict rules or restrictions on behavior. With so many children present, a few entertaining incidents could be expected as a matter of course. A particularly young disciple was wandering about. As he looked around, his terror became more and more apparent. Finally he burst into tears, attracting everyone's attention. "Waahh! Gege! Gege, where did you go? I can't find you anymore!"

"Song-xiong, you left your little brother behind!" someone called.

Amid muffled laughter, the elder brother turned back, red-faced, to find his sibling sobbing his heart out.

Another child chased someone through the crowd, yelling anxiously, "Nangong! Nangong! Wait for me!" He ran too quickly and tripped, falling flat on the ground.

Mo Xi blinked.

Gu Mang burst into laughter, turning back to look at his lover and his brother. Neither looked as relaxed as he was. They were plainly beginning to doubt how successful this school full of commoners would be. As Gu Mang watched their stiffening expressions, he couldn't help laughing more freely, clutching his stomach as he wheezed. "We'll manage, we'll manage."

Murong Lian swept his sleeves and gritted his teeth. “You can handle their discipline in the future. We’ve clearly welcomed a herd of idiots.”

“I’ll do it, I’ll do it!” Instead of objecting, Gu Mang enthusiastically raised his hand.

Mo Xi shot him a glance. “Forget it. If you’re in charge, in a year, these disciples will be even worse.”

Gu Mang fell silent.

The sun climbed in the east as they chatted, shining down on Wangshu Academy, gilding its tiles and filling its grounds with brilliance. The three of them watched as more and more disciples followed the teaching cultivators toward the training ground painted with a yin-yang design. There, they would wait for their new lives to begin.

The bell in the tower rang eighteen times, once each for the Six Teachings, Six Arts, and Six Virtues. When the final toll faded, Murong Lian snorted and swept out his sapphire-blue robes. Using qinggong, he leapt up from the welcome terrace, clearing the roofs and towers and landing gracefully before the hall on the martial field amid his disciples’ cries of shock and admiration.

Mo Xi stared, at a loss for words. Gu Mang shook his head helplessly and smiled. “It’s the same old Murong Lian.”

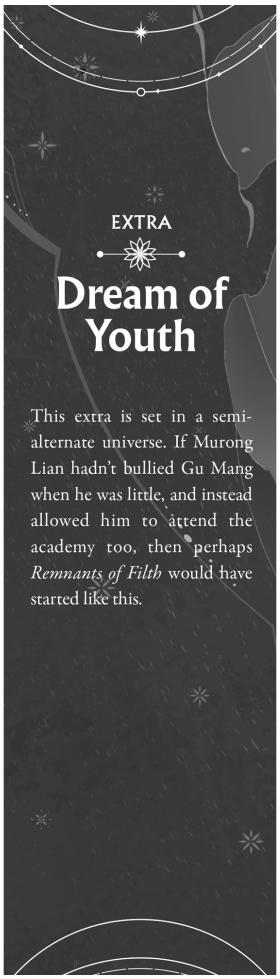
“Let’s go too,” said Mo Xi.

“Okay.”

The two of them looked at each other, fingers interlaced beneath their wide sleeves. They descended the steps of the welcome terrace beneath the radiant sunlight and walked toward their future.

The Reversal Stone hung as a pendant on Gu Mang’s chest. The little gem had lost its light and completed its mission—it would never be capable of reversing fate again. Yet it was a token of their love that had taken them through life and death; it had borne witness to their journey through worlds above and below, their refusal to separate in the face of the cruelest trials, and now, to the happiness that was theirs at last.

In the morning sun, the black crystal glimmered, scattering flecks of brilliance over Gu Mang’s clothes. Dark and dazzling, just like Gu Mang’s eyes, black once more. They had experienced the deepest darkness, yet today they shone with the brightest light in the world.



EXTRA

Dream of Youth

This extra is set in a semi-alternate universe. If Murong Lian hadn't bullied Gu Mang when he was little, and instead allowed him to attend the academy too, then perhaps *Remnants of Filth* would have started like this.

Chapter One

SPRING WAS COMING to an end in Chonghua. The pagoda trees in Mo Manor were in full and fragrant bloom, their boughs filled with delicate white petals and golden-yellow stamens. The scent was sweet, almost sickening.

A young Mo Xi stood by the window. He hadn't yet attained the towering physique he would grow into later, but he was already tall for his age, and handsome. His phoenix eyes were cold by nature; his irises were dark, his lips pale and thin, and his nose high and straight. Compared to the other noble young masters his own age, there was little of the child left in his features.

Hearing a knock at the door, Mo Xi turned. "Enter."

"Shaozhu, you'll be entering the cultivation academy tomorrow. Madam prepared many sets of robes for you, and some books, star charts, and talisman papers that you'll need at the academy…"

"Leave them on the table."

"At once," said the servant. "Madam asks if you are free this evening. She wishes to take you to Qixia Pavilion to have a family dinner with Shirong-jun."

"I haven't finished packing. No need to bring me along," replied Mo Xi.

"Um…"

"If there's nothing else, you may go."

The servant withdrew, somewhat embarrassed.

Mo Xi waved a hand, and the bags his mother had packed for him were engulfed in blazing flame. The forking tongues of fire illuminated the youth's exquisite features, set in a mask of ice. Within moments, all that was left on the table was a smudge of dark ash.

Shirong-jun, whom the servant had mentioned, was Mo Xi's paternal uncle and his father's younger brother, Mo Xianting. The Mo Clan was small in number, and Mo Xi's father had no blood siblings. Mo Xianting was an adopted son; his status was nothing compared to his elder brother's. Mo Xi's father had died on the battlefield when he was only seven, at which point Mo Xianting began coming to the family manor to assist his adoptive brother's widow with greater and greater frequency.

Mo Xi had initially been grateful to this uncle. Yet one day, when he had stayed up too late reading and was walking back from the study, he saw the door of his mother's room slightly ajar. Warm candlelight spilled out of it. He had stepped forward to greet his mother, but before his hand touched the door, he heard rough panting from within the room.

Had the young Mo Xi understood what this entailed, he would never have glanced inside.

In his contracting pupils shone the reflection of two familiar figures, intimately entwined. His mother was lying on the table, her dark hair loose around her, almond eyes half-lidded. And there was the adoptive brother of his dead father, the man Mo Xi called Uncle. The two of them, wholly absorbed in each other, hadn't heard his approach.

Mo Xi's ears rang. This man dared to humiliate his mother like this—dared commit such immoral acts!

Disgust surged in Mo Xi's heart. In his fury, he wanted both to charge into the room and kill that man who was no better than a beast, and to turn and run from the door. But his blood and bones were cold as ice; his limbs felt like they'd been nailed to the floor. He couldn't do anything. Yet perhaps his wretched glance had some power—while his thoughts were in shambles, Mo Xianting sensed his gaze and looked up.

Their eyes met.

A crazed hatred appeared on Mo Xianting's face. At the sight of Mo Xi, he felt neither shame nor fear. Rather, his hips snapped more wildly, and the blissfully ignorant woman beneath him wailed louder. He stared into Mo Xi's eyes, baring his teeth in a dark leer. As if, even separated by death, he hoped to provoke that brother of his who lay beneath the Yellow Springs.

Mo Xi didn’t know how his feet carried him away from that doorway. His mind was blank, and his hands and feet were ice-cold. But he was a precocious child. He didn’t cry, nor did he fuss. Though his shock and disgust were such that he fell ill and was bedridden for months, he never spoke a word.

But matters of the heart were like flooding waters; keeping them dammed created more problems. Mo Xi’s physical ailments gradually mended, but the hatred in his heart twisted and grew. His originally aloof temperament grew colder still. He became taciturn, ruthless, and obsessed with cleanliness. He trusted no one and made no friends, allowing himself to become a complete outcast. When a young master of a noble family teased him at the end-of-year feast by showing him an erotic pamphlet, flames collected in Mo Xi’s palm without a second thought, and he burnt that book to ashes.

“What are you doing?!” The pretty little gongzi had hopped to his feet with a shriek. “You dare set this lord’s books on fire?!”

Mo Xi looked up, gaze icy. “Why wouldn’t I?”

“D-don’t you know who I am?! The nerve of you!”

“I don’t care who you are,” said Mo Xi. “If you show me filth like that again, the next thing I burn will be your hand.”

He wasn’t putting on airs; he really was disgusted through and through by lewd behavior and dirty talk. Perhaps it had already become an incurable aversion.

His family situation being what it was, Mo Xi had long since wanted to leave this manor and its dark undercurrents for the cultivation academy. But that uncle of his insisted on trapping him at home, making all manner of excuses to the emperor to keep Mo Xi from leaving.

“Xi-er is a filial child; he wishes to observe the mourning period for his father for three years.”

“Xi-er has a weak constitution; I’m afraid he wouldn’t be able to tolerate conditions at the cultivation academy for long. I hope Your Imperial Majesty will allow him another year to rest and heal.”

So on and so forth, putting it off by any means possible. Mo Xi was still a tender youth, whereas Mo Xianting had once been his father's right-hand man and was now titled Shirong-jun in the imperial court. He knew the emperor wouldn't believe a child's words even if he tattled. Not to mention, Mo Xi would risk Mo Xianting using the opportunity to weave yet another trap around him.

During the grand feast on New Year's Eve, the old emperor asked him with concern, "Xi-er, your uncle says you fall ill every other day and rarely leave the residence, and aren't quite suited for life at the academy yet. Do you have anyone to take proper care of you? If the healers you requested aren't helping, come to Shennong Terrace yourself to choose new ones. You're Qingchi's only son. If you lose your good health, how can we face our loyal subject in the afterlife."

Mo Xianting, listening nearby, grew terrified that Mo Xi might cause him new trouble. With a grin plastered to his face, he hurried over to change the subject.

Yet Mo Xi merely lowered his lashes. "I thank Your Imperial Majesty for your concern," he said. "I'm much better already." Mo Xi glanced at Mo Xianting and he chose his next words carefully. "Under Uncle's attentive care, how could I not be well?"

Mo Xianting was stunned. The lies he'd come up with sat, useless, on the tip of his tongue. What Mo Xi was thinking, he didn't know—but when he met those serene eyes like glimmering molten gold, he felt a chill skittering down his spine and broke out in cold sweat all over. Still he forced himself to speak with affectionate familiarity. "Ha ha, we're all family here. It's only my duty, Xi-er…"

When they had returned home, Mo Xianting thought how deeply embarrassing it was to be scared of a boy. His hatred of Mo Xi intensified.

Once, when Madam Mo was away, Mo Xianting saw Mo Xi sitting in the garden, reading beneath the awning of the outdoor corridor, a winter robe embroidered with a pattern of flying snakes and clouds draped over his shoulders. Though the child was still young, his face already resembled that of the man who had beaten Mo Xianting on every possible axis, as did his

bearing—solemn yet aloof. Malice curdled in Mo Xianting's heart. He walked toward the boy, his shadow falling across Mo Xi's book. "What are you doing?"

Mo Xi's hand stilled, but he didn't look up. After a beat, he continued reading.

Fury blazed through Mo Xianting, and he mocked him mercilessly. "Oh, you're learning on your own? How far do you think you can get? You should be groveling to the heavens in gratitude that you somehow managed to attain a spiritual core—yet you believe you can go on?" He laughed cruelly. "You're even more stupidly self-confident than your dead dad Mo Qingchi!"

His lip curled as he said the name, as if it burned his tongue. He wanted nothing more than to spit it out. "Now your mother is mine, and the Mo Clan is mine too—even if I can't kill you, I can make you wish you were dead. You've seen for yourself how I can stand in your way. Don't even dream of leaving this manor under your own power. If you have any sense, you'll get on your knees and beg. Call me *Father* three times and I might feel some mercy; next year, I'll ask His Imperial Majesty to let you enter the cultivation academ—"

He was still speaking when a burst of fiery light appeared in Mo Xi's palm. A scarlet spiritual whip heeded his summons and came ripping through the air, striking the unguarded Mo Xianting square in the face. Blood oozed from the lash mark.

"You! You—!" exclaimed Mo Xianting, stunned and enraged. "You little brat, you dare strike me?! I am your *senior*!"

"Mo Xianting." Mo Xi looked up, the sun at his back. Shadows shifted in his dark eyes, and his flawless demeanor of ice seemed to crawl with darkness. "Do not forget who you are."

Sparks crackled from the whip in his hand as it flung itself into the form of a massive flying snake, hissing at Mo Xi's feet.

Mo Xianting stared at that soaring snake. Fixing his gaze on its scarlet eyes, he cried, "The Huashe whip?! You're able to summon the Huashe whip??!"

“Even if Huashe isn’t a holy weapon, it has acknowledged the descendants of the Mo Clan as its masters for generations. Who else would it obey, if not me?” Mo Xi closed the book, his slender fingers reaching down to caress the soaring snake’s head. When his eyes snapped up, they were filled with derision. “*You?*”

“Impossible… This is impossible!” Mo Xianting stammered, his face ashen. “You…you’re so young—how could you have that kind of spiritual power?!”

Mo Xi didn’t answer. Light flashed in his eyes as he placed his hand back on his book. The soaring snake slithered up over the youth’s dragonskin-clad calves and coiled itself at Mo Xi’s side, its red tongue flicking in unmistakable threat. At a gesture from Mo Xi, Huashe subsided, no longer poised to attack. “Not everyone in this world thinks the way you do, nor do they seek the same goals as you. Mo Xianting, you may have lived a few decades more than me, but there are things you will never understand about the Mo Clan.”

Mo Xianting swallowed, forcing down the terror in his heart. His eyes were bright and crazed. “What don’t I understand? Your dad’s dead—so what if you’re the heir?! So what if you’re unnaturally gifted, so what if you can summon Huashe?” In his mix of fear and resentment, the man’s neck flushed red, tendons standing out. “Yes, you’re Mo-shaozhu—heh. But Mo-shaozhu, could you kill me? Could you go tattling to His Imperial Majesty? No matter how strong you are, you’re nothing more than a baby brat with a dead dad! What can you do?!”

He threw his head back and laughed, spittle flying. “Are you not still powerless to turn on me? Are you not still forced to watch your mother submit to me like a bitch in heat? Are you not still stuck in Mo Manor, unable to take a step outside?!”

How malevolent his laughter, how violent his expression. It seemed that, rather than scare the youth in front of him, his hateful speech was intended to bolster the courage in his own despicable soul.

Mo Xi didn’t speak. Had this conversation occurred right after he found out about his mother and his uncle’s torrid relationship, these words

would’ve indeed destroyed him. But much time had passed. His heart had already been torn apart, blood filling his chest, and a callus formed over that injury. His expression didn’t change a mote. He sat calmly on the bench in the corridor, his legs crossed and his elbow perched on the railing behind him. The gaze he leveled at Mo Xianting was calm, bitter, and pitying.

Those eyes looked exactly like his dead father’s had.

Only when Mo Xianting had his fill of laughing did Mo Xi finally speak, voice frigid. “You’re right. I cannot kill you, in the same way you despise me yet cannot kill me. You can keep holding me back, preventing me from walking through the great doors of the cultivation academy. But, Mo Xianting—”

He leaned forward, Huashe hissing over his shoulder. Against his will, his uncle took a step backward.

Mo Xi narrowed his eyes. “Do you think I care? Do you think I can’t cultivate outside of the academy? Do you think I’ll go insane and kill myself because you’ve done such despicable things to my mother? Or could it be that you think holding me back now means you’ll ruin my whole life?”

Mo Xianting’s face grew grayer with every word. By the end, his mouth was trembling so much he couldn’t speak at all. Mo Xi rose to his feet, back straight. The sunlight poured down on him, half his beautiful face shadowed and the other bathed in light. His thin lips parted around words like chips of ice: “Keep dreaming.”

That was what Mo Xi said, and it was indeed what Mo Xi did. Because he feared him, Mo Xianting hated him even more. He couldn’t outright harm him, but underhanded tricks he used in abundance. He kept Mo Xi at home for one year, then another. But Mo Xi was calm as still water, never wavering.

Finally, the emperor felt that the young master of the Mo Clan could delay his studies no longer. He personally wrote a decree requiring Mo Xi to enter the cultivation academy.

Chapter Two

"SHAOZHU, we're here."

Mo Xi moved the bamboo screen aside and alighted from the carriage. He stepped out into a bustling scene. Splashed in golden sunlight, the cultivation academy seemed especially majestic, with arching bridges and meandering paths, and guardian stone figures on the rooftops in the shape of dragons. Everything seemed extraordinarily imposing.

"The academy has strict rules. Those without jade tokens may not enter. I can only accompany Shaozhu to this point." Upon reaching the grand doors enchanted with a barrier, the housekeeper of Mo Manor stepped aside. "Does Shaozhu have any words for me to pass on to Shirong-jun or Madam Mo?"

"Not really."

The old housekeeper sighed. "Shaozhu…"

"Uncle Li, you don't need to repeat yourself." Mo Xi picked up his simple case—all he'd brought for luggage. "You may go."

With that, he strode through the barrier and entered the academy without looking back.

The academy was split into six main areas: the training field, the cultivation pavilions, the dormitories, the hunting grounds, the backwoods, and the lake. When Mo Xi passed through the doors, he was met by the training field.

It was high noon, and most of the disciples were in the dormitories or eating lunch in the dining hall. Only a few stragglers weren't eating and had nothing better to do than laze about. Beneath the blazing sun, two youthful cultivators were embroiled in a noisy tussle. It would have been fine if they were just beating on each other, but they were apparently incapable of doing it quietly. As he stepped onto the field, Mo Xi was treated to a stream of juvenile cursing.

One of the combatants was in the garb of a noble young master. “Fuck your mother!” he shouted. “How dare you seduce Lan-mei,[2] my little bluebell? Shameless asshole!”

The other was tall and muscular, and had wilder features. Possibly because it was scorching out, or possibly simply to show off, this rascal wasn’t wearing an upper robe. His powerful physique was bared to the sun, as was the bat tattoo on his shoulder. Disdain was scrawled over his face, fine nose wrinkling as he scowled. “Your little who? Greenbell? Bluebell? I ain’t running a dye shop!”

“And you dare deny it? You made a move on her!”

“That girl? I’m more likely to find *you* worth fucking.”

At this, the skirmish only grew more passionate. The well-dressed youth wielded a riding crop, while the tall one used a rapier. The two seemed to have similar levels of prowess, but the quality of the riding crop was much higher than that of the rapier. After a few blows, the tall youth’s rapier emitted a loud groan. Pushed to its limits, it splintered into motes of spiritual energy that scattered in the wind. Shocked, the young man swore. “Fucking hell—”

“Do you concede?!” The noble gongzi hissed, striking his opponent in the face. “Are you ever going to fool around with this lord’s girl again?”

The tall youth pressed a hand to a wound the crop had left on his abdomen and scoffed. “Concede what? When did I ever fool around with anyone? It’s not my fault your girl looked in my direction. What was I supposed to do, poke her eyes out?”

“Impudent! Kneel and beg for mercy, or watch this lord cut up your face!”

The tall youth swiped blood from the corner of his mouth, gritting his teeth in obstinate refusal. “Beg, my fucking ass! Go ahead!”

“You think I won’t do it?!” snapped the other boy. “Your sorry life’s worth so little this lord can kill you today without consequence!” He swung directly for the back of the tall youth’s head with killing intent.

The cultivation academy didn’t prohibit light sparring, but true duels were forbidden. Still, the rigid hierarchical system of Chonghua was present even here—the rule was mostly for show. Just as the gongzi had said, if a cultivator of noble birth harmed a lowborn classmate, they’d face few consequences.

Without warning, a beam of cold blue light descended from the sky. The plants in the training field were torn up and sent flying as the light streaked toward the riding crop like a dragon out of water. Between the impact of the light and the accompanying gale, the crop faltered. It hung in the air for a split second before dropping to the ground.

“Who’s there? Mind your damn business,” the gongzi swore furiously. “You wanna fucking die?”

The training field was silent. Just as the noble’s gaze bent toward Mo Xi in suspicion, there was a loud rustle in the canopy of the apple tree behind him. A young man dangled upside-down from a branch, snacking on an apple and grinning. This youthful cultivator doing his best imitation of a tree-hugging sloth wore a high ponytail fastened with a silver clasp, and sapphire-blue light armor with gleaming silver trim. Dark military boots encased his long legs, and his silver belt adorned with a qiankun compartment glittered as he swayed.

Startled, the gongzi took a step back and flushed. “Were you hiding in the tree just now?”

“Nope, I’ve been up here since before you two started arguing.”

“Why aren’t you eating lunch in the dining hall? Why are you in a tree?!”

The cultivator in the tree waggled his apple at him. “Isn’t my lunch right here? They water this tree with immortal nectar, so it fruits all year round and its apples are super sweet. Do you want a bite? I’ve got extra.” He produced a shiny red apple from his qiankun compartment, polishing it on his chest before offering it to the noble gongzi, all the while hanging upside-down.

“I’d never eat food for paupers!” snapped the young master. “Who the hell are you! Stay out of it! Are you looking for death?”

The youth sighed, flipping down from the tree. “Me? My name is Gu Mang.” When he stood up, Mo Xi could see that he was strong and beautiful, possessed of glittering eyes and a delicate, feral face. There was a captivating curve to his plush lips—they were the kind likely to smile often, and became truly bewitching when they did. He had just been hanging upside-down, and his cheeks were still flushed, his lips bright red.

He shot a look at the injured cultivator, then turned to smile at the discomfited gongzi. “I didn’t come here looking for death. I came to look for my friend.”

The tall youth behind him—Gu Mang’s friend—rolled his eyes. “Here to steal fruit, more like.”

Gu Mang felt no guilt whatsoever at being exposed. He batted his eyelashes at the other boy as if determined to make a friend of him. “Hey there, are you sure you won’t have some? They’re good for you, and *really* sweet.”

The gongzi looked at the proffered apple. At Gu Mang’s introduction, his expression had changed slightly, his gaze growing wary. He seemed to know Gu Mang’s name—but he still had to scoff for the sake of his pride. “Ha, I was wondering who would be so brazen. So it’s the academy prodigy, Gu-shixiong of the Murong Clan. What an honor it is to meet you at last.”

Gu Mang responded with courtesy as well, smiling broadly. “You flatter me. Brother, the academy forbids these duels. I don’t mind if you don’t take the apple, but could you do something about the fighting? Look, you’ve already made my bro bleed.”

“Is it my fault he’s incompetent and born of cheap stock? Bleeding because he couldn’t defeat this lord is what he deserves!”

“Bullshit!” snapped the tall youth.

Gu Mang put up a hand to warn him back, still wearing that same careless smile. “You’re right, you’re right. Since you’re so formidable, I’ll ask you to be magnanimous, then. I’ll apologize on my shidi’s behalf. I’m sorry.” He bowed, then grabbed the tall youth and attempted to make a

quick exit. “Brother, if there’s nothing else, we’ll stop taking up your lunchtime. See ya.”

“Stop right there!” the gongzi cried. “Gu-dashixiong, you think that’s the end of it?” He bared his teeth in a snarl. “This apology of yours is rather lacking.”

Gu Mang turned back and fluttered his lashes. “Oh? Then what would you have me do?”

“I want him to kneel. Out of respect for your family’s Murong-gongzi, I won’t make him beg. Three kowtows will do it!”

“Pah! Keep dreaming!” snapped the tall youth. “I, Lu Zhanxing, would rather die than kneel to you!”

The little gongzi ignored him, choosing to sneer at Gu Mang instead. “Gu-shixiong, you saw the whole thing. This brother of yours has no understanding of status, acting high and mighty despite being born in the gutter. Given his lineage, kneeling is letting him off easy. I don’t think it would be out of line to have him lick the bottom of my shoe.”

Gu Mang met that malicious gaze head-on, smile never wavering. “Crudely reasoned, but not wrong. But Brother, don’t forget this is the cultivation academy. The school has its own regulations.”

“This is still Chonghua,” the gongzi said with a nasty smile. “Chonghua has its rules, and Gu-shixiong better not forget that either.”

“You’re quite correct,” said Gu Mang. He yanked Lu Zhanxing to his side. Despite being a sight shorter than his friend, Gu Mang pinned him in place and shoved his head down. “Come, Xiao-Lu, hurry and bow to the gongzi.”

Lu Zhanxing’s lip was curled in fury, but for some reason, he didn’t protest. Mo Xi, watching from a distance, was puzzled until he realized Gu Mang was hiding a bit of magic in his palm. He’d cast a silencing spell when he pushed down Lu Zhanxing’s stubborn head and rendered the boy mute.

Gu Mang looked up. “Look, Brother, he’s bowed and apologized. Let’s all take a step back; no kowtowing necessary. We’re all fellow

disciples here."

The little gongzi was used to getting his way. He'd been embarrassed here today; how could he let Lu Zhanxing off so lightly? Snickering, he said, "Gu-shixiong, you're a reasonable guy. If I fucking want him to kneel, then he'll kneel. I've humored you enough. What now, you want *me* to yield? Do you think a little sweet talk'll get him out of this?"

Twisting his neck, Lu Zhanxing struggled free of Gu Mang's grip. "You're seriously fucking vile!"

"Enough! Do you have any right to speak when we're talking?!"

The gongzi drew back his hand to slap him across the face, but the strike never landed. Gu Mang had grabbed him by the wrist. His voice was deep, yet naturally soft—he was still smiling, but it was no longer sincere. "Sun-gongzi, are you sure you want him to kneel?"

"Of course! My Sun Clan is noble through and through—what's the problem with making one lowborn mongrel get on his knees?"

"All right." Gu Mang nodded, releasing his wrist and lowering his lashes. Just as everyone thought he really was going to let Lu Zhanxing kneel, Gu Mang shoved him away and raised a hand. Blazing light flashed in his palm, and a gale swirled to life as a sparking blue scimitar answered his summons.

"What are you doing?!"

The perfunctory smile on Gu Mang's face had vanished. He took a long stride forward, dark boots crunching in the gravel as he bore down on the gongzi. "Can you not tell?" Gu Mang loosened the leather vambraces on his wrist to reveal a hidden weapon compartment and looked him in the eye. "I'm gonna kick your ass."

Lu Zhanxing hadn't feared the lash to the chest, but he was worried now. "Gu Mang, don't make trouble. You'll get yelled at."

Gu Mang glanced at him and rolled his eyes. "Aiyo. Why didn't you think about me when *you* were making trouble?" He brandished his blade, turning back to the gongzi with an expression of lazy confidence. "Come,

Brother, let your Gu Mang-gege teach you a lesson—eat apples when they're offered, and know when it's time to repent."

Lu Zhanxing blinked. Wind rustled the leaves. It looked as if a great battle would break out at any moment.

A prohibition talisman exploded in midair. The regulation elder's voice boomed out from the talisman: "Gu Mang, Lu Zhanxing, Sun Lin, what the hell are the three of you doing on the training field? Cut it out!"

Stunned, Gu Mang let the spiritual energy he was about to unleash fizzle in his hand. He looked up at the messenger spell and laughed in frustration. "Ah, of course the old man had to find out *now*."

The elder's voice continued its disembodied scolding. "Stop fighting! All three of you can go back to your respective halls and reflect on your actions!"

Sun-gongzi knew he could never defeat Gu Mang in a real fight; he'd only provoked him earlier because he was sure Gu Mang wouldn't dare harm a relative of the imperial clan. Unfortunately for him, Gu Mang didn't give a damn and had been truly intending to beat him to a pulp. This interruption was the perfect excuse to bow out, so he hastily pointed a finger at Gu Mang. "I'll let you off this time, but you'd better watch yourself! Next time this lord won't go easy on you!" He then ran off with all haste.

Once again, Lu Zhanxing was rendered mute. As Gu Mang watched Sun-gongzi's figure disappear at the edge of the training field, he swatted Lu Zhanxing's head. This time he was smiling for real, a sight to behold—his features seemed to glow like a queen of the night flower in bloom. But what came from his lips was pure gossip. "Hey, I heard you got with Sun-gongzi's girlfriend. Is that why he came to make trouble for you?"

"It wasn't like that." Lu Zhanxing crossed his arms and grumbled, "That girl came to flirt with *me*. I've got plenty of girls after me; why would I go for one who's taken?"

Gu Mang slung an arm around Lu Zhanxing's neck, smiling as he ground his teeth. "Well aren't you popular. Listen the fuck up—when you

meet a noble this unreasonable, turn around and run the other way. Next time you clash with them, you might be saying bye-bye to your head."

"Why are *you* lecturing me*?* You lost your patience with him too and tried to beat him up!"

Gu Mang sighed gustily. "I'm not at risk. I'm so good-looking—who could bear to hit me?"

"You're *so* shameless…"

The spellcasting was over, so Mo Xi began to walk away. Yet at these last muttered words, he couldn't help glancing at the pair one more time, inwardly agreeing. *Mn. He* is *shameless.*

This shameless Gu-shixiong heard footsteps and turned, his eyes meeting Mo Xi's for the first time. It was a careless glance, but when they saw each other's faces, both were compelled to pause a few more moments.

Gu Mang's thoughts were simple. *Eh? Strange, how come I've never seen this shidi before?*

Mo Xi's thoughts were even simpler: *What do you think you're looking at?*

Lu Zhanxing had also noted the unfamiliar face. He was forthright by nature, and any questions he had emerged unfiltered from his mouth. He waved at Mo Xi. "Excuse me, Shidi…"

Before he could finish, Gu Mang clapped a hand over his mouth. He smiled and nodded at Mo Xi, then dragged Lu Zhanxing away. "Let's go; time to copy some books."

Lu Zhanxing's protests came out muffled. "I wath juth gonna athk who he wath, he wath watching the whole time errier."

"Stupid child, that kid's even more trouble than Sun-gongzi." Gu Mang lowered his voice as their footsteps took them farther and farther away, but Mo Xi still caught a snatch of it. "Didn't you see that coat of arms? He's from the Mo Clan. He could crush you to death with his little finger…"

Lu Zhanxing craned his neck around to look at Mo Xi, his eyes narrowing slightly. But he didn't speak again.

Gu Mang nudged Lu Zhanxing's head back around. "He's a noble young master; don't stare. Keep your nose clean."

"Shut up—you were just staring at him too!"

"Me? I'm allowed—haven't I said I'm so handsome, normal people wouldn't have the heart to fight me…?"

Their voices faded, disappearing at last along with their silhouettes. Mo Xi stood for a moment longer, then expressionlessly walked off in a different direction.

As a new student in the academy, Mo Xi couldn't start cultivating immediately. He had to start with many other things, like praying to the deities, getting registered, listening to the academy rules, and more. He had to memorize a full two hundred jade scrolls: New disciples needed to know the contents of these scrolls by heart and pass the regulation and discipline elders' exams before they could officially commence their studies. Over the course of the next few days, Mo Xi met countless people and memorized innumerable things, such that he quickly forgot his run-in with Gu-shixiong. Even the name *Gu Mang* had long disappeared from his mind.

This was hardly his fault. Who would remember a stranger's name, one they'd heard only a few times at that? But if Mo Xi were to be given another chance, he would certainly have committed that name to memory, together with those eyes as gentle as spring foliage. If he had, he wouldn't have found himself in such a mess the first time he fought with Gu Mang at his side.

"Mo-gongzi is a son of heroes indeed, with the gifts and intelligence to match." The discipline elder clucked in satisfaction as he looked over Mo Xi's exam. "Your handwriting is elegant, your responses are exceptional, and you've memorized the twenty-eight thousand and seventy-four historical events of the academy in a mere seven days. This old man is impressed, truly impressed." The elderly cultivator stroked a handful of his white beard, spiritual energy gathering in his palm. He left an *Honors with*

Distinction stamp on Mo Xi's scroll and smiled. "You passed. Rest well tonight and go to Qianling Elder's hall tomorrow at dawn—he'll explain the arrangements for your weapon trial in detail."

As a son of a notable family, of course Mo Xi knew what he meant by this. A fitting weapon was important to any cultivator, whether they specialized in healing, defense, or in offensive techniques. The weapons sold at regular shops, made of common steel or copper, were for ungifted civilians to play with; they were of absolutely no use to cultivators. The weapons of cultivators were all formed from spiritual vessels—like the ancestral Huashe whip of the Mo Clan, the riding crop used by Sun-gongzi, the dual blades wielded by Lu Zhanxing, or the narrow scimitar used by Gu Mang. Any new disciples who wanted to form a contract with a better holy weapon needed to first complete a trial. It was a real battle, but it wasn't overly dangerous, especially since a shixiong or shijie[3] would accompany the disciple to avoid any mishaps.

The weapon-seeker's companion was chosen via a random draw. Qianling Elder, who oversaw such matters, kept a colorful lacquered box in his room. The elder would pick a jade token from within, and the name of the selected disciple would appear on top. This time was no different.

Qianling Elder glanced at the name that appeared, thought for a moment, then handed the token to a nearby servant boy. "Go to Yanbie Hall and find this one for me."

Chapter Three

IT WAS EVENING, the air thick with moonlit dew. On the training ground in front of Yanbie Hall, four cultivators were locked in fierce combat. Or perhaps more accurately, three were in combat with one. The one who fought alone flew swift as any bird, his form as unshakeable as a boat floating on the river. With a delicate leap off the tips of his toes, he soared dozens of feet into the air. Rather than strike out with his hands, he kept his fingers interlocked at his chest, forming a blue barrier screen that shielded him from his fellow disciples' attacks.

Gu Mang—for Gu Mang it was—was sparring with his martial brothers out of sheer boredom. One of his opponents was Lu Zhanxing, the tall youth who'd gotten into an altercation with Sun-gongzi. Gu Mang was grinning merrily. "You said you'd need only ten moves to break my barrier. Each of you must have struck at least a hundred times by now. Do you still want Gege to keep playing with you?"

"Try another one of my strikes!" called Lu Zhanxing. A fireball the size of a carriage wheel roared in his hand and hurtled toward his opponent, striking Gu Mang's barrier with a *boom*. Furious flames soared skyward as tongues of fire swallowed Gu Mang. Dense black smoke roiled in all directions.

The other two were struck speechless; they froze and turned to Lu Zhanxing. "Woah, we're just sparring for fun. Wasn't that too much? What happens if you hurt Gu-shixiong?"

Lu Zhanxing was unfazed. He scrunched his brows low and retorted, "How could Mang-er be hurt so easily? You guys are seriously underestimating him."

He'd hardly finished his sentence when they heard laughter from within the flames. "Thank you for the compliment, but this is the one hundred first strike. Brother, are you sure you want to keep going?"

The three of them watched in amazement as a beam of brilliant blue light broke through the billowing flames. The delicate shell of the defensive

barrier had held fast. Gu Mang soared up on a gust of wind, his blue and white disciple's uniform fluttering in the moonlight. The sparks flickering to earth resembled fireworks scattering behind him.

Gu Mang grinned. "If you want to keep going, I'll gladly humor you. If you don't, you'd better pay up."

The two younger disciples recalled their weapons. "No more!" they cried with conviction. "As promised, we'll do all of Gu-shixiong's laundry this month!"

"Zhanxing, what about you?"

Lu Zhanxing stood stiff for a moment before dismissing his weapon as well. He turned and snorted. "Cheater! None of us know this barrier technique of yours. Compete with me on something else!"

"Sounds good." Gu Mang touched down nimbly upon the ground. With a wave of his sleeves, both the barrier and the flames vanished, leaving nothing but drifting ash. He looked up. "What do you want to compete on?"

"Qinggong."

Gu Mang glanced down at Lu Zhanxing's legs. Sun-gongzi had struck him there during their fight, and Lu Zhanxing still limped a bit. He couldn't help arching a brow. "You sure?"

"Never mind! We'll do swords!"

The shidi beside him reminded him softly, "Lu-shixiong, he trounced you at swordplay just last month. How could you forget?"

Lu Zhanxing cleared his throat awkwardly. "Wait a minute! I think it's best if we compete hand-to-hand!"

Gu Mang smiled. "All right."

Thus these two advanced cultivators started brawling like commoners. Lu Zhanxing was tall and broad, his movements fierce as a tiger's, but he was barely able to graze his opponent's clothes as Gu Mang danced away. He soon grew frustrated. "Why do you keep dodging? Are you trying to waste my time?"

Gu Mang didn’t answer. Instead, he asked, “Are your wounds from your fight with Sun-gongzi healed?”

Lu Zhanxing blinked. “Pretty much—why?”

Voice languid, Gu Mang sighed. “Gege dear, I’m worried I might hurt you.”

A sharp gust of wind was his only warning as Gu Mang launched a lightning-fast kick at Lu Zhanxing’s midriff. This whip of a kick was swift and brutal; Lu Zhanxing fell to the ground with a grunt. Before he could get to his feet, Gu Mang hauled him up with one hand. He brushed the dust off Lu Zhanxing’s robes and grinned. “Look, did I lie to you? Does it hurt?”

The rascal who’d just walloped him was now examining him with earnest concern. Lu Zhanxing’s face flushed red; he huffily waved his hand. “Hurt? That little kick?! It felt like getting an itch scratched!”

“Oh.” Gu Mang chuckled and nodded. “How manly. Let’s go another round.”

Lu Zhanxing nearly choked. “Forget it,” he said with a hasty bow. “I, uh, I twisted my hip. I’m out. You win tonight.”

Gu Mang beamed. “Since I won, you can buy me candy. Milk-flavored, two bags of it.”

“Didn’t you say one? You bastard, the second you open your mouth you start raising the price!”

The bastard glanced at him reproachfully. “How can you say so?” he asked. “What do you mean *raising the price*? You’re the one who insisted on fighting me, then you lost twice in a row. And now that you’ve lost, you wanna go back on your word…”

The more he said, the redder Lu Zhanxing’s face got. Unable to bear it any longer, he cut Gu Mang off with a wave of his hand. “Fine fine fine! I’ll buy it! I’ll buy it for you! There, are you happy? Eat your goddamn fill! Heaven knows how you’ve never gotten cavities?!”

As they bickered, Qianling Elder’s boy servant arrived and shouted at that rascal who was clinging so stubbornly to his own shidi for candy. “Gu Mang-shixiong!”

Gu Mang turned to answer the child with a smile. “It’s the boy who serves Qianling Elder.”

“Gu-shixiong has a good memory,” said the boy politely. “Qianling Elder asks to see Shixiong in private.”

At this point, Lu Zhanxing’s pain and anger had subsided. He murmured, wide-eyed, “Why would Qianling Elder want to see you? Ah… I bet he drew your name to accompany a new disciple for their weapon trial.” He shook his head. “You’re famously lazy. That time you went to exorcize demons with me, you hardly lifted a finger. You sat by eating watermelon while I dealt with the monster! Ah, I feel bad for whichever disciple drew you as their partner.”

“Hey now,” said Gu Mang. “When I went on that exorcism mission with you, I did more than eat melon. I also cheered from the sidelines.”

“You cheered for the female fox demon!”

Gu Mang stroked his chin. Realizing there was no way to refute Lu Zhanxing’s point, he had to agree. “Yep, you’re right. I’m lazy as hell, and this mission for the new shidi is probably complicated as hell.” He turned to the boy. “Knowing me, the new shidi or shimei[4] might end up protecting me instead. Why not let this brave shixiong do it in my stead? He’s super hard working.” He pointed shamelessly at Lu Zhanxing, who blinked.

“Gu-shixiong jests,” said the servant. “The elder drew your name, so of course you’re the one who has to go.”

“Is that so?” Gu Mang blinked, sighing. “Ah, bad luck.”

“Think of it like this, Shixiong,” the boy urged. “Looking after new disciples is a fated bond between schoolmates.”

Gu Mang sighed again. “Ah, ill fate.”

Lu Zhanxing watched this unfold with amusement. He crossed his arms. “Mang-er, don’t be too disappointed. I heard a lot of pretty girls entered the academy recently. Best of luck.”

“Don’t talk nonsense, I’m not that kind of guy.” Nevertheless, Gu Mang turned and inquired, “May I ask if I’m being sent to escort a cute and delicate shimei?”

The boy shook his head. “It’s a shidi.”

Gu Mang was crestfallen.

The boy seemed to be holding back laughter. But he was young; after a few beats, he couldn’t help himself. “Gu-shixiong, actually, there’s more.” He flashed a wide grin, exposing his pearly little teeth. “There’s no shimei for you to escort, but due to the unique mission you two will be undertaking, there *will* be a maiden on this journey.” He burst into giggles. “Shixiong, do you want to know who it’ll be?”

Gu Mang looked up at him, feeling his neck prickle ominously.

At dawn the next day, a few red-crowned cranes flew through the skies above the cultivation academy, beating their wings against the cool morning wind.

Mo Xi had always been punctual. The rising sun found him already waiting by Qianling Elder’s door. After a little while, the elder pushed open the door and emerged wearing a lilac Daoist robe, his black hair bound up and a horsetail whisk resting in the crook of his arm. He nodded. “Despite your noble birth, Mo-gongzi, you always abide by the rules and are never tardy.”

He lowered his lashes. “As I should. My greetings to Qianling Elder.”

Qianling Elder gave him a small smile. “My greetings to Mo-gongzi.”

Mo Xi waited a little while. When Qianling Elder said no more, he asked, “Would the elder please begin the trial?”

“Not so fast,” Qianling Elder said. “We’re waiting for one more person.”

He knew a shixiong or shijie was to accompany him. He found it unnecessary, but he said nothing when he remembered that this was one of the academy’s rules. He waited patiently—for almost a full two hours.

Mo Xi stewed in a terrible silence. Just as the water clock showed the hour to be nearing mid-morning, the hour of mao, and Qianling Elder was

emptying his fifth pot of tea, someone blew in like a gust of wind on the mountain steps. “Here, here! I’m here! I’m not late, am I?”

Speechless, Mo Xi stared. Qianling Elder shot a glance at the water clock. “No, it’s still the hour of yin.”

“Glad to hear it.”

That gust of wind stilled. Bathed in the morning light, a sprightly figure clad in a white cloak with golden trim stood before them, face hidden from view beneath a wide hood. All that emerged was a voice, low and husky and slightly indistinct. “Heh, I’m right on time.”

Mo Xi’s eyes widened. *Do people this shameless actually exist?*

The expression on Qianling Elder’s face didn’t shift a mote. “Yes, you’re very punctual, coming during the last fifteen minutes of the hour of yin.”

“What about our shidi here?” asked the newcomer. “When did he arrive?”

“He was also very punctual. He was here in the first fifteen minutes of the hour of yin.”

“Tsk, what a hard-working shidi. As the waves of the Yangtze river push ever forward, so does the younger generation push the older. And how much more forward the youngsters are!”

Mo Xi could only stare.

Qianling Elder set down his teacup. He rose from the stone table under the banyan tree and waved a hand. “Allow me to give you two an overview.” He gestured at the newcomer. “This is one of your senior disciples in the academy, and your shi—” He coughed. “Shijie. Her name is Gu Mang.”

Gu Mang smiled as she lowered her hood, exposing a pretty face, sun-kissed and golden. Her eyes were black and bright, with an elongated tail, and her lips curved with the promise of a smile.

“Hey there,” said Gu Mang. “Forward-wave Xiao-Shidi.”

That name—*Gu Mang*—sounded familiar, as if Mo Xi had heard it somewhere before. He had been searching his memory, but as soon as he heard this weird new nickname, he frowned.

The familiar-looking shijie didn’t mind at all. She batted her lashes as a smile rippled across her face. “You can call me Gu Mang. Or Older-wave. In any case, in this vast mortal world, names can change just as unpredictably as one’s gender…”

Qianling Elder coughed, lowering his voice reproachfully. “Gu Mang.”

“Ah, never mind.”

Qianling Elder glared at her, or, perhaps more accurately, at him. Indeed—due to the unique demands of this trial, either the disciple or their protector had to masquerade as a girl. Qianling Elder had plenty of medicines that could temporarily change one’s features, but he wouldn’t make Mo-gongzi take them. Thus, the task naturally fell to Gu Mang. When Gu Mang had heard this last night, he nearly turned tail and ran; he agreed to cooperate only after certain conditions were met.

The conditions Gu Mang set were somewhat unconventional. He insisted that, although he could return to his original appearance at the end of the trial, his psychological trauma could not be ignored. He required Qianling Elder to buy him ten big bags of soft milk candy afterward. “The kind from Cuizhi Confectionary in the north of the city. Ten bags of three hundred candies each for a total of three thousand,” he said. “Don’t think I won’t count them,” he’d said. “You can’t skimp.”

Qianling Elder completed his introductions. “This is Mo Xi, Mo-gongzi, son of Fuling-jun. I mentioned him yesterday.”

Gu Mang smiled. “I remember, I remember.”

With names out of the way, there was no need to waste any more breath on pleasantries. Qianling Elder cut straight to the point. “Listen up. I’ll give you two a summary of this trial.”

Chapter Four

THERE WAS A LITTLE TOWN known as Lotus Village three days away by carriage, Qianling Elder explained. Chonghua had tens of thousands of villages and towns of all sizes; Lotus Village wasn't on an important road, and had no local specialties, nor any notable heroes or officials. Such a village should have remained obscure. Yet three or four years ago, this village had suddenly made a name for itself among married women, who began to visit in droves.

"What for?" Mo Xi asked.

Hoping the two disciples might get to know each other a bit, Qianling Elder said, "Gu Mang, you brief Mo-gongzi."

"Okay." Gu Mang turned to smile at Mo Xi. "Mo-shidi, what do you think girls care about the most?"

"I don't know."

"Think about it," Gu Mang prompted him, patient. "Of the girls you've known—perhaps even your childhood sweethearts—what did they care about?"

Mo Xi had never had any childhood sweethearts, but he tried his best to answer. "Face."

"Yep, you're right, girls want to have a pretty face. Other than their looks, what do girls usually wish for?"

"I don't know."

"What else? A loving husband and cute children." Gu Mang smiled. "Though some might disagree, this is tradition, and most girls in Chonghua have to stick to it. As Qianling Elder mentioned, Lotus Village wasn't famous in the past, but became popular among women in the last three or four years. When a place attracts a specific demographic, it probably appeals to their particular wishes. But these women aren't maidens; they're already married. So what are they wishing for?" Gu Mang expected another *I don't know*, so he answered his own question: "Children, more likely than not." He turned to Qianling Elder. "Elder, am I right?"

Qianling Elder poured himself another cup of tea. After drinking it, he said slowly, “You’ve got a good memory. You more or less recited everything I told you last night verbatim.”

Gu Mang’s attempt to act clever had been exposed, but he showed not the slightest hint of embarrassment. He looked back at Mo Xi, unperturbed. “See how the elder is praising me.”

Mo Xi thought it best not to comment.

Qianling Elder sighed helplessly. “Stop messing around; I’ll explain the rest.” His gaze swept over Gu Mang and Mo Xi’s faces. “It’s as Gu Mang said. Lotus Village earned its fame by fulfilling the wishes of those yearning for children. About four years ago, the local temple manifested a spirit. This spirit appeared to the town matchmaker in a dream and said all couples who came in earnest would be blessed with a child. Word spread like wildfire, and before long, the whole village knew of this. Even folks from the capital began to make visits to beseech the spirit.”

“So I’m guessing something happened at this temple?” asked Gu Mang.

“Correct,” said Qianling Elder. “About a month ago, the eldest daughter of the Bai Clan—a big merchant family here in the capital—went with her husband to pray for a child. They went missing on the way back, and no one’s heard from them since. The weapon trial I’m assigning you is thus to go to Lotus Village and find out what happened to this couple. Understood?”

“Understood,” Mo Xi replied.

“Then go quickly,” Qianling Elder said. “The academy has assessed the spiritual flow at Lotus Village; there’s little danger. The two of you should be able to handle anything you encounter without too much trouble.” He shot a glance at Gu Mang. “Gu Mang, take good care of your shidi.”

Gu Mang turned to Mo Xi. “Shidi, you have to take good care of me. I’m lazy, greedy, and in general pretty useless.”

It was obviously a joke, but the humorless Mo Xi took it at face value. He nodded, then turned his handsome face coolly away. Judging by

his listless expression, he'd believed every word and didn't quite understand why the elder would assign him a lazy, greedy, and generally useless shijie.

"Um…" Gu Mang might as well have cracked a joke at an icy wall. He scratched his head in embarrassment.

Qianling Elder fastened a vambrace to Mo Xi's wrist. "This is the rhinoceros-horn vambrace; it can sense all of the judgments you make on this journey. You must not take it off without permission. Bring it to me upon your return, and I will go to Jincheng Lake and request a suitable weapon."

Mo Xi acquiesced. Qianling Elder gave them a few more reminders, then issued his last request. "There's one more thing I'll ask of you."

He was watching Mo Xi's face intently, as if unsure how he would react. Gu Mang seemed to guess what was coming; his gaze wandered away as if bored.

"Elder, please instruct us as you see fit," Mo Xi said.

"In order to get to the bottom of whatever's going on in that temple, I'd prefer you two to stay undercover. Before you draw out the spirit, do not rashly use magic. You must pretend to be a pair of newlyweds there to pray for a child."

Mo Xi's gaze flickered. Lowering his lashes, he pressed his lips together and did not immediately agree.

Qianling Elder had heard of this youth's proud and haughty demeanor. Even if this rascal was mature for his age, the elder thought, he was too stubborn for his own good. But as he struggled to think of a way to persuade him, he heard Gu Mang laugh. "Maybe we should drop it. I don't mind, of course; the mission is most important," said Gu Mang. "But what about Mo-shidi? Look how icily perfect he is; he probably guards his purity more jealously than unmarried maidens. Wouldn't I be tarnishing his pristine reputation if he pretended to marry me?"

Mo Xi turned on him with a freezing look. "Don't be ridiculous."

“How am I being ridiculous? I’m only trying to be considerate of Mo-shidi’s feelings. We may just be pretending in front of others, but you’re still getting the short end of the stick. If people get the wrong idea, why, I might actually have to take responsibility and marry you.”

“No one asked you to!”

Gu Mang smiled. “You don’t want me to take responsibility? How could that be? See how unhappy you look already—you’d probably take role-playing extremely seriously as well. If I don’t do the right thing, wouldn’t I become a flower-plucker, a lecher, a scoundrel who harasses innocent beauties…”

As his descriptions grew more and more outrageous, Mo Xi’s fury reared its head. If the elder hadn’t been watching, he might’ve punched Gu Mang right there. But Gu Mang was still babbling endlessly, intent on painting a vivid picture of Mo Xi as a maiden secluded in her boudoir. Finally Mo Xi could endure no more. Face going green, he snapped, “Impudent!”

He’d been pushed too far, and his rage came out in the style of a young master’s scolding. Startled, Gu Mang looked at him with those bright black eyes and blinked innocently.

Mo Xi knew he’d misspoken. He turned away, biting his lip, then spoke coldly. “I have never shirked my duties. Shijie need not expend so much effort on my behalf.” When he looked back at Gu Mang, his eyes were glinting with sharp and icy light. “I’ll do whatever’s needed.”

He accepted the mission letter from Qianling Elder, bowed politely in farewell, and strode out of the hall. He completely missed the sight of Gu Mang behind him, laughing his head off.

The two thus set off on their journey to investigate Lotus Village. They were impersonating the sort of civilian who lacked spiritual energy and lived humbly; such people wouldn’t be able to afford carriages or nice clothing. They dressed as commoners and traveled on foot.

Swaying branches threw dappled shadows over their path as the sun shone merrily overhead. Gu Mang dug two candies out of his bag. He

unwrapped one for himself and passed the other to Mo Xi. “Shidi, want one? It’s really good.”

“I’m fine, thanks.”

His words were clipped, his tone cool and indifferent. It was clear he wanted as little as possible to do with this shijie. But Gu Mang didn’t get angry; he only laughed. “Dear husband, that’s right. If there’s candy to be had, you should let your wife have it all.”

Mo Xi tried to let this go, but found he couldn’t hold back. “You’re a girl; how can you be so flippant?” he bit out. “Don’t you feel ashamed?”

Gu Mang hadn’t wanted to take this role at first, but Mo-gongzi turned out to be terrifically fun to tease. The further he pushed him, the more entertaining he became. Now Gu Mang exclaimed, all earnestness, “Eh? Why should I be ashamed? We’re just walking on the road together; nothing inappropriate. It’s not like you’ve been kissing me or clinging to me in broad daylight. What do I have to be ashamed of?”

Mo Xi stopped short, fuming. He looked as if he had something to say, but whatever it was, he swallowed it and walked ahead on his own. He had no interest in seeing the sights or taking any breaks, and even less interest in chatting with Gu Mang. Marching along with this kind of single-minded focus, they had already crossed five hills and arrived by a melon field by noon.

Gu Mang was swinging a willow branch he’d snapped from the side of the path in utter boredom. He trailed far behind Mo Xi. At this point, he couldn’t stop himself from shouting, “Mo-shidi, shidi shidi, say, can you stop a minute?”

He had tried to crack jokes and make conversation with Mo Xi the entire way, only to be categorically ignored. He thought Mo Xi would ignore him this time as well, but to his surprise, Mo Xi paused and turned back. “What.”

“I can’t walk anymore.” Gu Mang grinned shamelessly. “Why don’t you give me a piggyback ride?”

Mo Xi glared, but couldn’t muster up the will to reply.

“You’re so mean.” Gu Mang laughed. “Fine, don’t carry me. We can rest and cool down in the shade.”

“If you need to rest, you can do so on your own. I’ll go ahead first and take a look.”

“How brave of you. Aren’t you tired?”

Mo Xi shook his head and trekked off deeper into the wood. Gu Mang watched his lonely silhouette until it disappeared into the shadows, then sighed and sat down on the side of the trail with his back against a tree. He touched his face and mumbled, “Ah, back when Zhanxing accidentally ate illusion powder, I said he made such an awful girl anyone who saw him would choose to risk their life on the front lines rather than start a family with him. I’m probably even uglier wearing this illusion than he was.” His face crumpled. “What to do? I even bet Zhanxing I’d win Mo-shidi over—I bet three boxes of desserts from Yaoyue Tower. Ahh, no desserts for me.”

He rambled on, thinking aloud. “Mo-shidi has such good stamina. We’ve walked a long way without using any spiritual energy, but he hasn’t slowed a bit. These pureblood nobles really are terrifying.”

As he pondered aimlessly, a youthful figure appeared in his hazy peripheral vision. Mo Xi had returned, carrying a bamboo basket in his hand. He walked out of the blaze of the sun into the shade of the forest and placed the basket in front of Gu Mang.

“What’s this?” Gu Mang craned his neck in curiosity. He took the lid off the basket and peered inside. There was a bowl of straw mushroom and cabbage stewed with tofu, a bowl of radish soup, two bowls of white rice, and two sets of bamboo chopsticks. Although the dishes were simple, they were piping hot and seemingly fresh off the stove. Gu Mang exclaimed, beaming, “Mister Immortal, how’d you conjure up a basket of food?”

“I bought it. There are some houses up ahead.”

Gu Mang’s eyebrows rose. *He went to buy food? This kid is boring and haughty, but I guess he’s not completely heartless.*

He snatched up a pair of chopsticks. “Many thanks,” he said with a smile.

Mo Xi ignored him, lowering his lashes as he arranged the dishes. He sat down on the forest floor with perfect posture and began to eat in silence. Gu Mang took a bowl as well, sizing up this little shidi once again. Mo-shidi ignored him the whole time with his eyes downcast, quietly picking at his tofu.

Gu Mang wanted to chat with him a little more. But his earlier teasing had angered him, so he didn't know where to start. He cleared his throat, then coughed—once, twice, three times…

Mo Xi finally looked up. Pleased, Gu Mang put on a friendly smile and took a breath, ready to chat with this beautiful new shidi. But the beautiful shidi knit his sharp brows. "Are you coming down with something?" he asked icily.

Gu Mang choked. "I—"

"Do you need some medicine?"

Setting down his bowl, Mo Xi reached for his qiankun pouch. Gu Mang's mind filled with buzzing. *Holy shit. Xianjun, forget about giving me medicine—you're the one with the problem!* He hastily held up a hand and laughed awkwardly. "There's no need, it just went down the wrong pipe. Eat up, Shidi."

Mo Xi didn't press the issue. He glanced again at Gu Mang, then put his qiankun pouch away. Dipping his head, he ladled a bowl of soup.

"For me?" Gu Mang looked at the bowl Mo Xi held out to him with increasing astonishment, feeling a strange combination of gratitude and unease. "Thanks."

Mo Xi had grown up as a rich young master; there were always people saying *shaozhu* this and *gongzi* that. He was used to hearing *thank you* and *sorry* a hundred times a day, so of course he had no reaction at all to Gu Mang's quick "thanks."

A person's true nature was always revealed if one watched them closely. Everyone considered pureblooded nobles to be cruel and tyrannical, and the Mo Clan was a famously accomplished military family. Mo-gongzi, Gu Mang thought, ought to have been extremely arrogant. Hence his

warning to Lu Zhanxing when they'd first crossed paths on the training field—Mo Xi was someone whom neither of them could afford to offend; it was much better to stay out of sight. But as one day turned into another on the way to Lotus Village, Gu Mang felt that this youth might not be as he'd first assumed. Patiently observing Mo Xi's each and every move, Gu Mang discovered this young lord of the Mo Clan was rather different than the rest.

Mo Xi spoke very little. Though he was most often expressionless, a wave of melancholy sometimes passed over his features. When Gu Mang spoke to him, he rarely turned or acknowledged him; the only sign he was listening was the flutter of his lashes, like thin smoke on the wind, as he blinked. Yet if Gu Mang really needed anything, he was surprisingly reliable. Gradually, Gu Mang found himself taking something of a shine to him.

On the evening of the third day, they at last approached Lotus Village. As they walked down the little road on the village outskirts, fireflies dancing over the fields, Gu Mang looked at those glimmering sparks and said, "Mo-shidi, after this trial, you'll formally become a disciple and begin your studies. There are seven main elders in the academy, each managing one of seven sacred halls. Have you thought which you'll enter?"

"Yaotian Hall."

"You're so sure?"

"My father was from Yaotian Hall."

Gu Mang blinked, the corner of his mouth quirking up in a smile. "Right, I forgot. You pure-blooded nobles always keep to the same hall."

Mo Xi said nothing. Gu Mang thought he would drop it, but Mo Xi spoke up again. "Which elder is Shijie studying under?"

This was the first time Mo Xi had asked anything about him in all the days they'd been together. Shocked, Gu Mang smiled. "Oh, I'm from Yanbie Hall."

Yanbie Hall was the most eccentric and strange of all the seven halls. The most arrogant decorated nobles, the most terrifyingly unpredictable

masters of poison, the most vicious and cruel assassins, so on and so forth—almost all were cultivators who had come up in this sacred hall. Given Gu Mang's lack of discipline and impertinent manner, his chosen hall was no surprise.

But for the sake of politeness, Mo Xi merely said, "That's very nice."

Unexpectedly, Gu Mang laughed. "Shidi says so out loud, but you're probably thinking something like: 'Oh, turns out she's from the Yanbie Demon Cave. I didn't expect to be working with a disciple from the most wicked sacred hall out of all the seven. How unlucky. Let's quickly finish this mission so I don't have to deal with this demoness anymore.'"

It was true Mo Xi wanted to be rid of Gu Mang as soon as possible, but he didn't think she was as bad as that. "Yanbie Hall is just Yanbie Hall," he said. "Where did the name Yanbie Demon Cave come from?"

An imposing sternness had appeared on Mo Xi's handsome face. With his brow furrowed like this, he was the spitting image of the strictest elder in the academy, Shiwei Elder. Gu Mang couldn't help breaking into laughter. "Ha ha ha ha, you… You're really… Everyone says Yaotian Hall is filled with the most accomplished people who stand at the top of their respective fields. I've never met someone like you before, but now that I have, I know it must be true."

Walking and talking, they arrived at the gates of Lotus Village before they knew it. Still chattering away, Gu Mang caught sight of a great stone by the gate, as tall as three men and inscribed with words in gold and scarlet: *Tender pistils soaked in midnight dew; lotuses plucked in a dream of spring.*

"Ah, it seems we've arrived." Gu Mang read those lines again, one corner of his mouth twitching. "This town is so improper," he mumbled. "Why'd they carve lewd poetry on the welcome stone?"

Mo Xi read the verse on the stone twice, trying to understand how it was inappropriate. To him, they only seemed to describe a lotus-filled lake at night. Thinking Gu Mang was making fun of him again, he glared at him irritably and strode ahead into the village.

Gu Mang rubbed his nose, watching Mo Xi's retreating back in exasperation. "Mo-shidi, I'm not lying. Read it again; this poetry really is lewd…"

Chapter Five

IT WAS LATE by the time they entered the village. They had hoped to find an inn to rest in, but the village was filled with branching paths, arrayed like the scatter of sticks thrown for divination. They couldn't locate the green flag of an inn anywhere.

The summer weather was prone to changing quickly. They were still looking around when a bolt of lightning flashed in the distance. Thunder quickly followed. Gu Mang raised a hand, letting a few fat raindrops collect in his palm before saying helplessly, "Just our luck. It's raining."

"Put up the hood of your cloak and wait for me under the awning there. I'll go see if there's an inn nearby."

Gu Mang drew his hood up. "I'll go with you. You'll have to come back for me otherwise."

The two of them quickened their pace through the alleys. But the storm clouds were rolling in, and before long torrential rain started pouring down. The swift summer rain trapped them beneath a row of shingled eaves. A rain-blocking barrier could have easily solved their problems, but the elder had instructed them not to use magic carelessly. Now that they'd arrived in Lotus Village, they needed to be even more cautious.

Mo Xi didn't mind getting drenched, but when he looked over, he saw that Gu Mang's robes were soaked through. Girls were prone to catching cold in the rain, he thought, and his laid-back shijie didn't seem the hardy type. If they remained here and waited for the rain to stop, she might take ill the very next day. With this in mind, he peered at a house up ahead. Though the door was closed against the night, faint light shone through the cracks.

"Follow me," he said to Gu Mang. "It's raining too hard; forget about the inn. I'll ask that family up ahead for a favor."

Gu Mang thought this sounded reasonable and hurried out into the pouring rain after Mo Xi. As they arrived at the door, it flew open. A

woman’s surprised cries came from within, followed by wild barking. A big black dog limped out, strong and fierce-looking, howling as it darted through the door. The woman inside shouted, “Get back here! You—get back here or else!”

Nimble as ever, Gu Mang darted forward and caught the dog before it bounded away.

Mo Xi took this chance to come up to the open door. Inside the house was a four-section screen; from behind it came the sound of panting and cursing. “Damn it all, son of a bitch, worthless bastard…” After a beat, a woman came around the screen, supporting herself on the wall. The sight of Mo Xi’s face in the moonlight was enough to halt her stream of mumbled profanity. She added a final “fucking hell” before asking, “Who are you?!”

Before Mo Xi could answer, she cried fiercely, “Get out of the way!”

She staggered outside, ready to give chase. This was certainly an unusual sight: The dog was hobbling, and so was his mistress. Before she’d managed more than a few steps, Gu Mang came through the pouring rain, running back from the end of the street with that snarling dog in his arms. He ducked his face around the dog, a wet pawprint on his cheek as he smiled. “Miss, your dog is so cute. Here, I’m giving him back to you.”

Mo Xi looked at Gu Mang in disbelief. This girl was possessed of a supernatural gift—how exactly did she take a look at this snarling, drooling dog with a foot-long tongue and think *cute*?

The woman hesitated, then reached out to take the hysterical dog from Gu Mang. “Many thanks,” she muttered. She glanced at the two of them standing beneath the lintel and blurted, “Hey, are you two here to pray for a child?”

“No,” said Mo Xi.

“Yes,” said Gu Mang.

The woman blinked, arching a brow. “I’ll be nosy for a moment. What’s the relationship between you two?”

“She’s my elder sister,” said Mo Xi.

“He’s my husband,” said Gu Mang.

The two of them, sticking to different scripts, spoke at almost the same time. The woman slowly narrowed her eyes, looking appraisingly from one to the other. After a moment, she burst into laughter, squinting at them. “I get it; you don’t want to let other people know. You two sure are brave—you eloped, right?”

Mo Xi and Gu Mang both blinked.

The woman didn’t try to hide her curiosity. She petted the dog in her arms as she sized up this secret couple. Under her naked stare, Gu Mang reached the limits of his patience. He turned to shoot Mo Xi a glare—*Fuck you, Mo Xi! Why didn’t you follow the elder’s script?!*

Mo Xi had thought there wasn’t much point in explaining so much to a woman they’d only met by chance, so he’d said Gu Mang was his elder sister. How could he have known it would lead to this kind of misunderstanding? For a moment, he was speechless. But it was still his fault—he turned away, and after a long silence, said mildly, “She’s a distant cousin.”

The woman clucked her tongue, shaking her head. “Your family opposed it, didn’t they? Ah, too bad, too bad. Where are the two of you planning to elope to?”

Gu Mang smiled and tugged on Mo Xi’s arm, feigning bashfulness. “We didn’t come here to elope. My husband and I married last year, but we’ve not received any good tidings. We heard praying for a child at the temple here is effective, so we came to pray sincerely, hoping for a baby. Dear husband, wouldn’t you agree?”

He was earnestly trying to get back at Mo Xi, his words sickeningly sweet. As expected, Mo Xi became so angry his entire body tensed. But he had no choice except to purse his thin lips and hold it in, nodding almost imperceptibly before immediately turning away, knuckles cracking under his sleeves.

Gu Mang was trying not to laugh, but the woman cut in, “Um…did you two bring enough money?”

“Huh?”

“You can’t just show up at the temple here and pray as you wish. There’re a number of gates; it costs an arm and a leg to get in these days. If you don’t have some valuables on you, you won’t even make it past the threshold.” The woman swept a glance over their plain garb. “You might as well give up.”

“Oh…” Gu Mang grasped her implication and smiled. “Miss, don’t worry—we did some farm work on the way here and managed to save quite a bit. It should be enough.”

The woman didn’t soften at all. After a moment of hesitation, her slender brows drew into a scowl. “Don’t go,” she said sternly.

Mo Xi turned to her, his gaze like cold lightning. “Why not?”

Rather than a new husband ready to pray for a child, he sounded much more like a warlord about to perform an interrogation on the enemy. The woman grew suspicious. She frowned at him and said nothing.

Sensing the conversation was heading south, Gu Mang furtively tugged at Mo Xi’s sleeve and smiled. “Miss, don’t take offense. My husband truly cherishes me and wants us to have a child very badly, so—”

“I’m warning you, don’t go there—you mustn’t go under any circumstances,” the woman insisted. “The rumors about the temple granting wishes of fertility are all made up. The point is to trick rich fools into going. Praying there doesn’t work.”

“But so many people come here to pray,” Gu Mang said. “If it doesn’t work, why would everyone believe it?”

“It’s a long story, but in short, praying there isn’t just useless—it actually does harm.”

“What harm?” Gu Mang asked curiously.

“Don’t ask too many questions. Little miss, please listen to me. I’m not lying to you.”

Gu Mang considered this for a moment, then smiled. “Jiejie, how about this? We just got here and can’t find an inn. It’s raining so hard, and we didn’t bring an umbrella. We’re soaked. Jiejie, if it’s not too much

trouble, would you help us out by letting us rest here for the night, and then you can tell us some more about the temple?”

He produced some money and offered it to the woman with both hands. The woman hesitated. “Um…”

At her conflicted expression, Gu Mang added, “Jiejie, if it’s too much trouble, then never mind.”

The woman bit her lip and peered into Gu Mang’s face. “If I don’t explain, will the two of you go to the temple?”

“We’ve already made the long journey here. It would be hard to leave without good reason.”

“Ah…” The woman stamped her feet. Unfortunately, this hurt her lame foot even more. She caught her breath, swearing softly, and looked up. “Okay. Thanks for catching my disobedient dog. You two seem like good people, so I’ll tell you the details. But wait a moment—my house is too messy for guests right now. Let me clean up before inviting you in.”

With that, the woman dragged the whining dog inside and hooked the door shut with her foot. Gu Mang knew Mo Xi would start kicking up a fuss as soon as she was out of sight, so he thought to preempt him. “See that?” he said, quickly turning to Mo Xi. “That’s what real skill looks like. Unlike you, completely forgetting the elder’s instructions.”

Even if Mo Xi knew Gu Mang was being deliberately shameless, he couldn’t defend himself. He merely looked at him coldly.

“I’m really impressed by you young masters from Yaotian Hall,” Gu Mang continued. “Such righteous gentlemen, incapable of putting on an act.” He shook his head. “That was like performing a one-man show. I’m exhausted.”

Mo Xi at last broke his silence, saying flatly, “Was Shijie not having fun?”

“Oh certainly it was fun, but having fun alone isn’t as good as having fun togeth—”

The door creaked open, and the woman turned aside to make room for them. “Come in. Look at how soaked you are—come, I’ve lit the coal

brazier for you. Go ahead and warm up."

The two of them followed her past the screen and entered the house. Silks and brocades were draped everywhere in this abode. Colorful cloth hung off the beams and bolts lay in piles by the walls. When they walked in, the misty scenes embroidered on the fabric rippled. Silver threads danced on the wings of red-crowned cranes, the flowers' brilliant purples and scarlets seemed to bloom, and lengths of white gauze, hanging from a drying rack, fluttered down in diaphanous layers. The scene was like a lovely dream from which one might never want to wake. An embroidery platform was arranged by the window, with a loom next to it. There was nothing else.

Gu Mang looked around and exclaimed, "Jiejie, you're a seamstress?"

"Yep." The woman tugged at a few pieces of gauze. "It's a meager living. I take all sorts of sewing work—clothing, gauze canopies, bedding, screens, embroidery, you name it. Would the two of you like to commission anything? I make wedding robes too."

Gu Mang smiled. "My husband and I were married with just a cupful of nuptial wine. We eloped against our parents' wishes after all. How could we have the nerve to ask for wedding robes?"

"That won't do," the woman said. "Getting married is a big step. It's still best to hold a proper ceremony once you're settled. Even if you don't have a feast, the wedding regalia, veil, and scarlet gauze are a necessity. It's a once-in-a-lifetime occasion, after all. Meimei, if you're willing, come to me in the future. I'm not given to boasting, but dragon and phoenix designs are my best work. I started helping my parents when I was barely six, and I've done at least eight hundred wedding robes, if not a thousand. They're gorgeous, I promise you."

She turned and saw Gu Mang and Mo Xi still standing by the wall. Smiling, she waved a hand. "Come here. Why are you being so shy?"

"We haven't greeted your esteemed parents," said Mo Xi.

"Them? They're already dead."

Gu Mang's eyes widened. "I'm so sorry," he said hastily.

"It's nothing," the woman replied. "Right, I haven't introduced myself. My name is Su Qiao. What about you?"

They both gave their names. As they chatted, Gu Mang felt a tickle in his nose. Ducking aside, he let out a great sneeze.

Su Qiao shot him a glance. "New brides are often frail; you might catch a cold. You'd better change out of those wet clothes. Come with me to my room, we'll find you something."

Although Gu Mang had taken the illusion powder and was playing his part well, he was still a man. He had no business entering the room of a woman, nor committing the greater offense of wearing her clothes. "Please don't trouble yourself," he said. "I'll warm up by the fire. I'll be dry soon enough."

So saying, he obediently sat down next to the brazier.

Su Qiao didn't press the matter. She nimbly picked up a copper teapot. "I'll fetch some water from the back and we'll see about some ginger tea. You two sit and chat, just don't touch the cloth," she warned. "These silks and brocades have already been sold, and the material is ungodly expensive. There'll be trouble if it's ruined."

Only after they both expressed that they wouldn't touch a single strand of silk did Su Qiao limp away.

After she left, Mo Xi said, "Are you not uncomfortable?"

Gu Mang stared at him blankly. "What?"

"Your clothes are soaked."

"Oh, um…" Gu Mang licked his lips, his dark eyes warm and bright in the light of the fire. "I'm sharing weal and woe with you. A married couple are kindred spirits, so now, we're both drowned rats." Gu Mang batted his lashes at him. "Dear husband, does your heart ache for me?"

Mo Xi looked up at him with those fathomless black eyes, annoyance creeping over his handsome face. He turned away. "Shameless."

How am I shameless, Gu Mang thought silently. *That's not true at all. If I really had no shame, I could have seized the chance to peep into a lady's bedroom and take advantage of her. I wouldn't be sitting here by the fire next to your scowling face. Ah, Mo-shidi, you're maligning a good man. Not only does your Gu-shixiong have shame, he's a righteous gentleman. You blind little rascal—to think you're disparaging me instead of praising me. Tsk, there's no justice in this world.*

But as he couldn't say any of this out loud, Gu Mang changed the subject. "All right, no more arguing." Grinning, he pointed at an embroidered screen illuminated by the hazy firelight. "Miss Su is really talented. Her birds and beasts are lifelike enough, but look, these scenes from stories—like that one showing Chang'e soaring to the moon—are so beautiful as well. Look at the silhouette on the gauze. Doesn't it look just like a graceful maiden?"

Mo Xi followed his pointing finger. On a square of bright yellow gauze hanging across the roof beam, there was indeed the silhouette of a life-sized maiden embroidered on the cloth. Even though it was only her outline, every stitch was perfect; even the eyelashes were fanned out realistically.

"This depiction of Chang'e isn't as detailed as the red-crowned crane on the one next to it, but it's still very interesting." Gu Mang put a hand to his cheek. "I wonder what such a big embroidery piece can be used for."

As the two of them gazed at Su Qiao's masterpiece, they heard the creak of the door. Su Qiao returned with a full teapot, bringing the cold air of the night into the room with her. She sat down cross-legged by the coal brazier and nestled the copper teapot into the coal, where it emitted a hiss. "Sorry for the wait. Come, didn't the two of you want to ask about the temple? We can talk here by the fire."

Gu Mang smiled. "Then we'll trouble Miss Su for her advice."

"It's not really advice. I'm worried you won't believe me even if I explain it."

Gu Mang and Mo Xi exchanged a glance. "Why wouldn't we?" asked Gu Mang.

“That temple is shady. People from outside the village just know there’s a spirit they can pray to for fertility there, but there are other things the locals don’t want to talk about. The first is that the temple judges people by their faces.”

“By their faces?”

“That’s right,” Su Qiao said. “By their faces. It’s not like the gods in the rumors, where a fifty-year-old couple can get a child just by praying. The spirit’s picky; the bride has to be beautiful for any prayers to work. If the wife is ugly, she won’t get pregnant even if she breaks her skull kowtowing in the temple.” Su Qiao waved a hand. “But the mayor wants more money, so this isn’t something we’re supposed to tell people.”

Gu Mang’s smile faded. “Huh? It only looks at the wife? Does the groom’s appearance have any effect?”

“No. As long as the wife is pretty, the husband could look like a toad and it wouldn’t matter.”

Gu Mang sighed and nodded. “Then that temple is really harsh on women.” He rubbed his face, sounding rueful. “Someone like me definitely won’t pass muster.”

Su Qiao smiled. “If Meimei can’t pass, who could? If you were ugly, I wouldn’t have bothered stopping you; you could go ahead and pray. It wouldn’t work anyway.”

Gu Mang’s spirits rose as quickly as they’d fallen. “It’s wonderful to get a compliment from someone so pretty herself.”

Su Qiao was only too pleased to hear this. She and Gu Mang began to trade compliments back and forth. “Now now, both of us have our own good looks.”

“Your nose is pretty.”

“Your eyes are beautiful.”

“Your skin is so pale and clear.”

“Your waist is so thin and your butt is so perky.”

Mo Xi listened to them flatter each other for several minutes, his growing headache visible in the furrow between his brows. Only when he was at the limits of his endurance did Su Qiao return to the topic at hand. “To make a long story short, the temple fulfills wishes based on appearance, so many people pray here in vain. This is the first thing.” She paused, her brows knitting as her cheerful expression from bantering with Gu Mang became stern again. “But the second thing is more important. This is also something people in Lotus Village never tell outsiders.”

“We’re listening,” said Mo Xi.

Su Qiao didn’t speak immediately. She grabbed a handful of melon seeds from the copper bin and ate a few. Spitting away a shell stuck to her lip, she looked up and continued. “Actually…that temple isn’t benevolent at all. It houses a malevolent spirit.”

Chapter Six

GU MANG AND MO XI's expressions both shifted. The classification of spirits as benevolent or malevolent was used among commoners; cultivators generally made no such distinction. For a temple to gain a spirit meant there was some spiritual form hiding within it. If the spiritual form was benevolent, it would help people resolve their troubles without exacting too heavy a price. If the spiritual form was malevolent, the situation could become more troublesome. After these spirits granted a wish, they would demand a price from the supplicant—one usually far above the value of whatever boon they'd received.

Thus it was no surprise when Su Qiao said, "For the couples that pray at this temple, if those beautiful wives successfully conceive, their husbands will die mysteriously within a few months, a year at most. Without exception."

"So that's how it is…" Gu Mang murmured, sinking into thought. "Does the spirit take the husband's life in exchange for a child…?"

For a moment, the room was silent save for the crackle of coal in the brazier. Then a burbling noise cut through the stillness, white steam ribboning into the air. The tea was ready, and the domestic bustle of serving broke through the stiff atmosphere. Su Qiao lifted the copper pot and poured them all a cup. "Have some hot tea first."

The two of them murmured their thanks. Gu Mang stayed in thought as he drank. "Miss Su, about this temple… Does everyone in the village know this?"

"Some do, some don't," Su Qiao replied. "In any case, many pretend they don't even if they do. This village of ours is poor; we get by on the donations from the temple-goers. One trip to the tutelary temple costs a lot of money. The poor supplicants get chased away by the people taking fees at the door; usually only those rich landlords can afford to make their pleas to the spirit."

"No one warns those rich lords and ladies?"

“Why bother?” Su Qiao arched a brow. “Judging by your clothes, you’re both good ordinary folk. When have those nobles ever shown much care for us? They came here to pray of their own accord—it’s not like anyone dragged them here by the throat. If misfortune is written in their fates… Well, whose fault is that?”

Recalling that Mo Xi was born of one of the most noble bloodlines in Chonghua, Gu Mang worried he’d be angry. Yet when he glanced over, Mo Xi showed no sign of displeasure. He was deep in thought with his lashes lowered, mouth slightly pursed. Behind his focused expression, it was unclear what he was thinking.

“Anyway, quite a lot of diseased miasma comes through this village throughout the year. No one here has any spiritual energy or heavenly gifts; we can’t drive out the miasma and end up falling ill. When we get sick, asking those lords and ladies for money is harder than ascending to heaven. If we don’t take this opportunity to scrape what coin we can from them, are we supposed to beg for their pity when we’re on death’s door?”

Gu Mang sighed but had no answer.

Su Qiao looked out on the moonlit night outside the window. She rose to stretch, kneading her arm as she spoke. “All right, it’s late. The two of you know about the danger now. Sightseeing in Lotus Village is fine, but don’t go to that shady demon temple.”

“Of course; we’ll do as Miss Su says,” Gu Mang answered.

Su Qiao drifted away to tidy up the guest room for them. Seeing her limping again as she left the room, Mo Xi asked, “Miss, is your wound severe?”

“Oh. It’s nothing.” Su Qiao waved a hand. “That black dog of mine is dumb. He yanked at my cloths, I cursed at him, and the mutt fucking bit me.”

Mo Xi said nothing but passed Su Qiao a jar of salve. She took the jar of medicine and opened it to take a sniff. “Is this stuff expensive?”

“No.”

Su Qiao scooped some salve into her palm and returned the jar to Mo Xi. “The taxes have gotten ridiculous this year; no one has it easy. I can’t take this even if it’s inexpensive—I won’t be able to use everything in such a big jar anyway. You two should keep it for yourselves. It might come in handy.”

Bidding them goodnight, she limped upstairs to sleep, leaving them in the room with those silks and brocades ordered by rich families. The materials seemed so lavish, their golden weave and silver embroidery gleaming with light. Yet Su Qiao’s own clothes were plain and patched; she seemed insignificant standing among them, like a termite hole in the roomful of silk.

It was late. Mo Xi and Gu Mang closed the door in the guest room, then looked at each other. There was only one bed. An evil smile unfurled on Gu Mang’s face. He sat down on the bed, and Mo Xi looked away.

“Shidi, are you not going to rest?”

Mo Xi shook his head without looking at him. He was standing in the corner farthest from the bed. “I’ll go for a walk.”

Gu Mang knew Mo Xi was in a poor mood, so he sat on the edge of the bed with his legs crossed and his chin in his hand. “What if Miss Su goes to take a walk as well, and you bump into her? What will you say then?”

Mo Xi stared.

“Or is it that you think Miss Su is prettier than me, so you’re making up an excuse to peek at her?”

“Don’t be absurd,” Mo Xi snapped.

Gu Mang grinned. “Then I’ll trouble Shidi to behave and sleep.”

Mo Xi fell silent, as if contemplating how to avoid sharing a room with this little vixen, but in the end, he had no good ideas. He approached the bed with a scowl and stared icily down at Gu-shijie on the bed.

Gu Mang looked up at him through fluttering lashes.

Mo Xi blinked. After a few moments of silence, he raised a hand. Gu Mang thought he really would take off his outer robe and come to bed, until he saw Mo Xi's slender fingers moving toward the bedposts. With two crisp *clicks*, Mo Xi released the clasps on the side of the bed and used both hands to draw the canopies shut. There was a soft rustle of fabric as the curtains, white as moonlight, were seamlessly tugged closed.

Mo Xi's icy voice came in through the swaying canopy. "Lie down. Goodnight."

"Oh…" Gu Mang was taken aback. He stared blankly into space for a moment, then reached out to pull the curtain aside. He had a powerful urge to stick his head out and see what would happen if he didn't behave.

The instant he touched the curtain, Mo Xi grabbed his hand through the cloth. "What are you doing?"

Despite how young, even childish, this shidi was, his strength was formidable. Gu Mang's fingers were close to breaking in his grip, yet Mo Xi seemed oblivious. "N-nothing," he replied falteringly. "I just wanted to take a look at you. If there's anything to discuss, let's talk it out nicely, okay? Could you let go of my hand first?"

Mo Xi's brows drew into a scowl. "You *still* won't sleep? You *still* want to mess around?"

"Dage, I just wanted to tease you a little. No one's trying to provoke you. Good sir, could you please let go? You're crushing my fingers; keep it up and I'll scream."

This was the worst thing he could've said. Mo-gongzi hated being coerced into doing anything. Gu Mang's threat made him furious, and he exerted even more force. Gu Mang didn't hold back either—he was a man of his word, and immediately cried without the slightest hint of shame, "Husband… It hurts… *Ah!* You're so strong, you're really hurting me… Ah, *mmngh…*"

These cries were hoarse, his voice soft and extremely suggestive. It was unbearable. Mo Xi dropped Gu Mang's hand as if it'd burned him and yanked open the canopy, his handsome face furious and embarrassed in the candlelight. Before Gu Mang could speak again, Mo Xi shoved him down

on the bed and covered his mouth. He growled through clenched teeth, “What the hell do you want?!”

“It was a joke,” said Gu Mang earnestly.

Mo-gongzi’s chest heaved with barely suppressed rage. Glaring at the troublemaker beneath him, he spoke, each word ground between his molars. “If you behave and go to sleep, I’ll pretend none of this happened. If you keep provoking me, I promise you won’t be able to handle the consequences!”

Only when Gu Mang obediently stilled, gazing up at Mo Xi with docile, black eyes that seemed to be swearing *Dage, I was wrong, I’ll never do it again*—did Mo Xi lift his hand from Gu Mang’s mouth. His fingers had left livid red marks on Gu Mang’s cheeks.

Gasping for breath, Gu Mang looked up, teary-eyed, at the young master on top of him. He sighed. “Okay.” Then he added earnestly, “But, Shidi…next time you’re lecturing me, can we do it somewhere else? At least not in this position in bed?”

Chapter Seven

STARTLED, Mo Xi realized that, in his fury, he had pinned a young woman to the bed. Gu Mang's inky hair spilled loose over the sheets, and the canopy fluttered around them, painting an impossibly suggestive picture.

Mo Xi jolted to his feet, something flickering in his panicked gaze. Seeing him like this, Gu Mang was dead certain this young master would've pinned him to the wall and beaten him up if the circumstances were not so inconvenient. But after a long silence, Mo Xi merely raised a hand and yanked the canopy shut. A low voice came through the fluttering curtains. Stiffly, he said, "Sorry."

No way. Is this kid serious? Gu Mang sat up, legs crossed within the canopy, and smothered a laugh.

Mo Xi was still talking. "But I…despise that kind of inappropriate behavior. I ask for Shijie's understanding, and to please cease such antics."

"I won't do it again," mumbled Gu Mang. "I don't want to get thrown on the bed and taught another lesson."

No response came from the other side of the curtain.

"And you even pinched my finger until it bled."

"…You can pinch my finger until it bleeds as well."

This was definitely fair, but wouldn't a normal person say *Does it hurt? I have medicine*, or *I'm sorry, can I take a look?* At worst, they might say something like *Really? Are you all right?* What kind of brutal eye-for-an-eye logic was this? "Forget it, forget it, that's not necessary," said Gu Mang hastily. "I'm sleeping now. You should rest too."

Gu Mang slept soundly and woke at daybreak. He cautiously lifted a corner of the canopy to discover Mo Xi wasn't sleeping on the floor. Instead, he was sitting at the desk. Dawn was creeping through the

windows, and the early morning sunlight fell across Mo Xi's elegant face. The youth's features were sharp and defined, but his lashes were as soft, delicate, and slender as flower pistils. Mo Xi's head sank toward his chest; he had obviously been trying to keep himself awake, but had fallen asleep in the end.

Blinking a few times, Gu Mang looked thoughtfully at this highborn little shidi. The warm sunlight spilled in bit by bit, illuminating the room. The oil lamp in their room that had burned through the night finally ran out of fuel. With a sudden spray of sparks, it went dark at last, leaving behind only a faint trace of smoke.

After breakfast, the two said their farewells to Su Qiao. Before they left, Miss Su warned them again that they were not to go to the temple and handed them a paper umbrella. "The heat's been awful these past few days, and summer storms blow through every evening. I'm sure this'll come in handy." She smiled at Mo Xi. "Consider it me repaying Mo-gongzi for the salve."

They both thanked her. As they walked down a little limestone-paved alley, Gu Mang opened up the umbrella to take a look. He gaped for a moment, then exclaimed, "It's so beautiful! Miss Su's handiwork really is amazing."

Mo Xi glanced at it. The umbrella's paper surface glimmered with colorful inks. On its canopy was a delicately painted scene of green mountains and blue creeks, with terraces and winding paths scattered throughout—a beautiful landscape of peace and prosperity. He hadn't expected a seamstress from a poor rural village to hold such a majestic view of the world, and he couldn't help feeling surprised.

"I couldn't bear to use such a gorgeous umbrella even if it rained. I thought she'd given us a plain one—how could I possibly accept this?" Gu Mang passed the umbrella to Mo Xi. "Put it in your qiankun pouch and keep it safe. Once we're done with the temple, we'll give it back."

Mo Xi nodded and stowed the umbrella away. The two of them walked side by side toward the tutelary temple on the outskirts of the city.

Outside the temple, they saw the people Miss Su had mentioned, the ones who collected the worship fees. Four villagers obstructed the way into the temple, three older men and one young one. The first accepted the worship fees, the second sold incense, the third sold peach-wood marriage talismans, and the last was a little beggar. When Mo Xi and Gu Mang came upon them, these four were putting all their energy into making a racket.

The one taking entrance fees was yelling, “A thousand gold might not buy the joy of a full and happy family—loosening your purse strings as you enter will bring good fortune!”

The incense seller was bellowing, “Mortal wishes rarely reach the nine heavens, so pray before Buddha with sweet incense!”

The marriage-talisman stallkeeper was singing, “Such deep love is rare, may you be graced with a splendid lotus come autumn.”

In comparison, the little beggar’s act was rather simple. He smiled shamelessly, leaning on his ratty bamboo staff and knocking on his bowl as he cried in a high, clear voice, “Daddies and mommies, bestow some alms!”

As Gu Mang and Mo Xi approached the gates, the four grew more energized, like bees that had scented nectar. The little beggar was most enthusiastic of all, stretching his neck toward them as he bowed and scraped. “Lord and lady, young master and mistress, daddy and mommy, I wish you two conjugal bliss even when your hair’s gone white, and for children to fill your hall.” With that, he smugly lifted his bowl and beseeched them, “Do a good deed, spare a little change! Our godly grandpa will notice and you two will definitely have a child before you know it!”

Mo Xi had inexplicably become a lord to a lady, a young master to a mistress, a daddy to a mommy, and had bestowed upon him well-wishes for him to sire a brood of children on Gu Mang. Of course his expression was the opposite of pleased.

Gu Mang, on the other hand, stroked his chin with interest. With a laugh, he replied, “Great, if I’m ever out of options, I might just come here and become a panhandler. Bet I’ll be able to make a fortune in two years no matter what.”

The beggar shot him a wary glare. “This spot is mine. I won’t let you take it from me.”

Gu Mang burst into laughter and poked him on the forehead. “Didn’t you just call us lord and lady, mommy and daddy? You changed your tune so fast.”

“Mommy is whoever feeds me, and Daddy is whoever pays me.”

At this, Gu Mang dug around in his qiankun pouch. After groping a while, he fished out a blue cowrie. “All right all right, now call me Dad.” He pointed behind him at Mo Xi. “Call him Mom,” he added with a grin.

Mo Xi shot him an icy glare. He wasn’t the only one irritated; the panhandler rolled his eyes and snorted. “A pittance—are you trying to placate a beggar or please a spirit? Three silver cowries at least, or you’re not setting a foot inside!”

“Oh, you little—” Before Gu Mang could step forward, Mo Xi unblinkingly tossed three golden cowries into the beggar’s bowl, shooting Gu Mang a sidelong glance. “Go ahead. You know what to say,” he commanded the beggar.

The boy abided by a beggar’s code of honor; his anger transformed instantly into joy. He bowed low toward Mo Xi before sweetly calling “Daddy!” and shouting “Mommy!” at Gu Mang. Gu Mang was rendered temporarily speechless.

Mo Xi wasn’t keen on this form of address, but he’d gotten back at Gu Mang, so he stopped bickering for the moment. He paid the ridiculously high worship fee, bought six sticks of outrageously expensive incense and a terrifyingly overpriced peach-wood marriage talisman, then dragged Gu Mang into the temple courtyard.

Gu Mang sighed as he trailed behind him. “I was just joking. Why are you so petty? Look at you stewing over there; you’re angry again.”

“I’m not angry,” said Mo Xi.

Gu Mang arched a brow but didn’t expose him. He was clever—in the past few days, he’d acquired the knack of teasing Mo Xi. He could have some fun, but he couldn’t overdo it; the key was to stop just before crossing

the line. The principle was similar to fanning a flame: A gentle breeze made for a satisfying fire, but if you accidentally blew on it too hard, you'd end up with your entire face striped in soot like a tabby.

The two of them walked a circuit around the temple courtyard but noticed no obvious traces of malevolent qi. The enshrined statue of the tutelary god was surprisingly cute and couldn't be simpler; there was nothing suspicious about it at all.

Gu Mang shook his head. "It's noon right now," he said quietly. "This is when yang energy is most concentrated. Maybe not the best time to investigate."

"Miss Su said the effects will begin after we pray. Let's do that first and see," said Mo Xi. "If nothing happens, we'll come back at night for a more thorough investigation."

"Do you really want to?" Gu Mang laughed. "If you pray, you'll have to take it seriously. If you fake it even a little, the malevolent spirit might notice we're not as we seem."

Mo Xi swept his sleeves back. "I'm aware of that." Pausing, he turned back to look into Gu Mang's eyes, which gleamed with warmth. "But you have to do the same."

Gu Mang blinked. "Do what?"

"Be serious."

"Oh." Gu Mang grinned, the corners of his long eyes curving like the brilliant trails of shooting stars in the night. "Of course. In all the missions that I, Gu Mang, have undertaken, I've never failed a single one from lack of seriousness."

Mo Xi shot him a glance, then quickly looked away, face dark. Anyone could see he doubted the reliability of Gu Mang's words.

They stepped up to the prayer lamp and lit the incense with its flame. Gu Mang held the incense in one hand and blew on it to extinguish it, leaving a small ember at the end burning silently. Ash, soft and fragrant, whispered down. As the smoke curled toward the sky, the sweet scent of pine and cypress filled the courtyard.

“Half for you and half for me,” Gu Mang said, splitting the six sticks of incense. “Come, let’s go pray in the hall.”

Mo Xi and Gu Mang entered the tutelary temple together and knelt on the prayer mat before the virtue box. They lifted the incense over their heads, then brought it to their brows and slowly bowed together. They had intended to put their prayer into words, but neither knew what to say; they let the faint smoke rise as the incense ashes fell in silence. Finally, they kowtowed devoutly, their foreheads touching the floor, but with no wishes in mind.

Neither of them knew, at that moment, what wishes they might have for the person at their side.

Chapter Eight

THEY NOTICED NOTHING strange after they finished praying, so they both rose and left the hall.

“There’s just this peach-wood talisman left.” Gu Mang lifted the talisman, its golden tassel swaying, and peered at it. “What’s this for?”

“The seller said there’s a tree behind the temple. We’re supposed to hang it up.”

Talisman in hand, they walked a hundred yards from the temple hall and came around a bend to see an ancient, towering peach tree crowned with a jade-green canopy. Its trunk was strong and sturdy, so wide it would take seven or eight adult men linking arms to encircle it. A good half of the ancient tree’s trunk was leaning on a crumbling old wall. This tree was almost a forest unto itself, its roots a tangled mass at their feet. A few exquisitely attired young couples were praying around it, hanging their peach-wood talismans covered with wishes upon the tree’s lower branches. The tassels fluttered in the breeze, and crisp clattering noises rose from those thousands of wooden talismans. Mixed with the faint scent of candles and incense from the temple, it made for a scene of stately devotion.

As he studied the tree, Gu Mang sensed a wave of hidden malevolent qi. He looked askance at Mo Xi. As expected, Mo Xi was frowning as well, examining the ancient tree with a solemn expression. “You feel it too?” Gu Mang asked quietly.

“Mn.”

“No wonder there was nothing strange within the temple. Turns out it’s the tree behind it that’s the problem.”

Mo Xi brushed his long fingers over the coarse knots on the tree’s trunk. He closed his eyes to probe the flow of spiritual energy, then slowly opened them and shook his head. “It’s not a tree demon.”

Gu Mang also reached out a hand. “You’re right. This spiritual energy flow doesn’t feel like a demon’s, but rather a…”

“A ghost’s.”

Gu Mang looked up to assess Mo Xi’s handsome face. After a breath, he smiled. “Nice. You aren’t much behind everyone else in the academy, little newcomer shidi.”

Ignoring this, Mo Xi went on, “Ghosts won’t show themselves in the daytime. We should hang up the talisman, then return to investigate in the evening.”

He produced a pen and brush from his qiankun pouch, then paused with his hand hovering above the peach-wood talisman. He didn’t know what to write.

This wasn’t Mo-gongzi’s fault. Only two types of books lined the shelves in his library at Mo Manor: spell compilations and classic works of literature. Never mind those titillating tales of romance sold on the street; he’d hardly even read any love poetry.

Luckily, Gu Mang sensed his discomfort and stepped up to help. “Why don’t I write it? I won’t mess around.”

Mo Xi glanced at him dubiously, then handed him the talisman and the weasel-fur brush. This was a serious matter of exorcism, so Gu Mang didn’t act up. He bit one end of the brush in thought, his gaze flitting like butterfly wings over the innumerable wooden talismans hung on the ancient tree. The wishes of their predecessors swayed gracefully in the dappled sunlight, the soft clicks of the wooden plaques as they brushed against each other like love-struck whispers shared on a pillow. Some of the plaques bore old writing, some new; some were written in a clumsy hand and others in beautiful brushstrokes. The tree was weighed down with the mortal world’s love. On one of the older tablets, someone had written *Only a phoenix mirror and a flowering branch to keep me company; none know of these feelings I hold dear*, while others had inscribed *So long as we are never parted, I fear not even death*…

The emotions in those words were too grand. Gu Mang could joke around with Mo Xi, but it would be inappropriate if he really wrote down such solemn pledges of eternal love. After some thought, Gu Mang wrote the simple yet solemn words:

I wish to be ever by your side.

This didn’t sound too perfunctory—at least not enough to draw the malevolent spirit’s notice—but it wasn’t too intimate either. It was significantly more restrained than those countless oaths of lifelong love. Gu Mang looked up at Mo Xi with a smile. “How’s this?”

“Mn.”

“Don’t blow me off like that. Did I do a good job or not?”

Mo Xi was silent for a moment. “I can hang it up,” he offered.

“Not yet, wait a minute.” Gu Mang waved a hand. “There’s still something we have to add.” With that, he very seriously wrote two small characters on the edge of the peach-wood talisman—*Gu Mang*. He then passed the brush and talisman to Mo Xi. “Your turn.”

“My turn for what?”

Gu Mang widened his eyes. “To write your name; what else? Did you want to add another line like ‘he who knows not parting’s pain would never believe in white-haired grief,’[5] or ‘in life I’ll return to you, in death I will yearn for you’[6]?”

These verses only made Mo Xi frown. “I’m not adding anything.” He put away the brush and ink and stood up to hang the peach-wood talisman.

Gu Mang was displeased, scurrying after him, grousing: “Brother, you can’t be acting like this! Why am I on my own now? I’m getting the short end of the stick, aren’t I? No way, you have to write it—if you don’t, I’ll do it for you… Mo Xi! Stop right there!”

In the end, Gu Mang plopped down in exasperation on the rock-like roots of the ancient tree. Rolling his eyes, he said, “Fine, fine, you can hang it up. I’m too magnanimous to bicker with a junior, isn’t Shixiong generou—aiyo!”

Realizing his mistake, he hastily turned his face away and shut his mouth.

Thankfully, Mo Xi was standing straight-backed beneath the flourishing branches, engrossed in hanging their wooden plaque among the

assortment of peach-wood talismans. He hadn't registered that Gu Mang had called himself *shixiong*. Only after he finished tying the talisman securely and double-checked the knot did he turn. "What did you say?"

"Nothing," Gu Mang mumbled.

"It's just a wish—there's no need to sign it. Spiritual deities or demonic ghouls can all see who made it. These temple-goers aren't cultivators; they don't know any better, so they write their names on the plaques." Mo Xi came to stand before Gu Mang and peered down at him. "Why are you following their example?"

"I think their way is more formal," Gu Mang replied with conviction. "I'm trying to trick the old demon. Is that wrong?"

Mo Xi paused. "No."

"Then that's that." Gu Mang got up and stretched, then kicked a few stones beneath his feet. "There, all done. Let's find an inn and rest up before we come back tonight."

That evening, they settled at the Changsheng Inn. Lotus Village was poor, and most of its residents stayed in place and hadn't seen much of the world. They were used to their coarse and simple lifestyle; nothing much had changed in the past three or four years, even with the coin from out-of-towners visiting the fertility temple. Thus, though the distinguished Mo-gongzi asked for the best room in the inn, its conditions brought him no joy.

"You weren't this picky last night at Miss Su's house."

"We were guests then."

"You weren't this particular when we slept out in the open either."

"We were in a hurry to get here."

Gu Mang watched as Mo Xi assessed the furniture and bedding with an expression of icy detachment. Gu Mang fluttered his lashes, black eyes glowing with amusement and exasperation in equal measure. "Hey, this inn's beds look quite large to me—probably enough for three people, and its teacups are all clean. It's not as bad as you're making out." He reached out

to touch the sprig of rose balsam in the Ru-ware vase on the table. “Look, we’ve even got fresh flowers,” he said with a grin.

Mo Xi cast him a glance. Upon seeing that he really did look happy and content, he pressed his lips together and said no more.

Night fell before they knew it. The pair gathered their things and returned to the tutelary temple on the outskirts of the village.

The immortal arts hadn’t touched Lotus Village. The town counted not a single cultivator among its residents, and naturally lacked any enchanted lights. By evening, the owls in the wood beyond the village were making strange calls, and will-o’-the-wisps were glimmering over the burial mounds and fields. The place seemed completely abandoned.

They moved stealthily and quickly reached the back of the temple. In the dark, the ancient peach tree loomed over the grounds like a vengeful ghost that had crawled out from hell. Its branches were like claws overhead and its trunk was gnarled. Even the sounds of clinking wood—distant and soothing during the day—now seemed tainted with an air of ghoulish misery in the evening wind.

Gu Mang and Mo Xi were hidden in the darkness. Before they’d left the inn, they’d smeared a bit of refined grave dust on the backs of their hands, which had the effect of suppressing yang energy. Gu Mang carefully probed the nearby spiritual energy flow. “It’s getting stronger and stronger. At this rate, the ghost’ll probably show up around midnight.”

He stilled briefly, then spoke, uncharacteristically grave. “Oh yeah—I know you pure-blooded nobles all have strong weapons passed down through your bloodlines, but the trial vambrace on your wrist will prevent you from using those. Be careful; call for help if anything happens.”

Mo Xi looked at him. “Many thanks.”

“Don’t mention it.” Gu Mang’s solemnity lasted no more than two sentences. A moment later, his shameless smile was back. “If you call, I can run away quicker.”

The night was cold and damp. The bright orb of the moon peeked from behind gauzy clouds. Midnight had arrived.

All was silent beneath the ancient peach tree. Time trickled onward, but nothing strange happened. Just as the two were beginning to doubt their own judgment, they heard rustling from a nearby hillock.

Gu Mang shrank low to the ground. A dark shadow gathered, rising out of the earth and slowly coalescing into the blurry shape of a man. The figure trudged forward as if struggling through sucking mud, swaying as it moved toward the ancient peach tree. A string of mumbled sounds issued from its mouth, as if reciting the words of some ancient curse. The peach-wood talismans ceased their clattering and swayed rhythmically with that recitation. As they watched, faint red light flowed from the talismans and shot toward the figure in orderly arcs. It wasn't a windy night, yet the leaves seemed to be trembling; an incessant rustling spilled into the vast wilderness.

"It's absorbing the tree's spirit?" Gu Mang murmured to himself, then shook his head. "No, no way. How could a common ghoul be capable of absorbing the spirit of an ancient tree… So then the sound…"

Mo Xi spoke up. "It isn't coming from the leaves. Listen closely."

Gu Mang held his breath and focused. Comprehension dawned. "It's the wishes!"

The scattered whispers that sounded like rustling foliage were in truth the fragments of countless human voices mingling in the night. Both men and women were speaking, their tones adoring or sincere. Some were soft:

"I wish that we'll be husband and wife for all our next lives and forever."

"We'll stay with each other, even when our hair's gone white."

Others were funny:

"Zhang Dazhuang will love Sun Lianlian for a lifetime. If he breaks this promise, may heaven strike him down."

"If I, Jiang Maomao, ever betray Lu Wanshu, let me reincarnate as a pig butcher."

And some were the sappy verses of love poetry Gu Mang had noticed during the day, lines like, "Not until the mountains lose their peaks and the

heavens and the earth merge could I bear to part from thee," and "In the skies we'll be birds matched in flight, on the earth we'll be trees with limbs entwined," and so forth.

At this moment, the romantic feelings countless men and women had entrusted to these peach-wood talismans were all being awakened. Like a tidal wave they rushed toward that ghoulish apparition beneath the tree. The dark figure swelled bigger and bigger, its features sharpening. As wind whipped the branches overhead, the figure threw its head back and howled, glowing a blinding red.

When the light faded, a stumpy, stooped, and fiendish-looking man stood on the hill. Or perhaps not quite a man—a male corpse. The corpse was stark naked and dripping with fresh blood. He smacked his lips and belched loudly, then slowly turned his head.

Mo Xi and Gu Mang both stood speechless.

Worried Mo-shidi would cry out in fear, Gu Mang thought to cover Mo Xi's mouth; yet before he could, a hand was clapped over his own mouth from behind.

"Mngh…"

"Don't scream." Mo Xi watched the corpse warily, but his voice was quiet and calm at Gu Mang's temple. "He'll notice us."

This was so absurd Gu Mang didn't know whether he should laugh or cry. Still, he was shocked this inexperienced little lordling was so reliable. It was honestly rather impressive.

All these thoughts flitted through his head briefly before he turned his attention toward that vile corpse. The creature's nose was sunken in, and his pustule-covered face was twisted in an expression of depravity. More disturbing still was the anatomy below his waist: His exposed dick had been sliced up, like shredded cucumber, into a bunch of bloody strips. They shook with each step he took, bouncing in every direction.

This corpse bastard swayed silently; it seemed his flesh was weak, but his spirit was more than willing. He sniffed around, then pulled those mutilated lips back into an open grin. His voice sounded like a pig's bladder

flattened under someone's feet: "It smells so good, ah, so much perfume. Lots of little pretties came over today, eh heh heh."

He blew out a breath, and a bloody wind rose, rustling the leaves of the peach tree. Indistinct figures appeared one after another beneath its ancient branches, some sitting, some standing. The sharp-eyed Gu Mang immediately recognized several of the figures. "The temple-goers from the daytime?" he murmured. "Why's he summoning their images?"

His question was quickly answered. Mister Shredded Cucumber strode through the illusory figures of the temple-goers. He glanced at one maiden's afterimage and remarked scornfully, "Too fat." Looking at another maiden, he proclaimed, "But you're too skinny."

Shredded Cucumber browsed efficiently, deeming more than ten girls in a row unsatisfactory. He was breathing heavily, the fury contained within him growing more and more obvious. His voice started sounding sounded less like a pig bladder getting trampled and more like one filled with urine getting popped with a pin. He shrieked in frustration, "Fucking hell, you're all so ugly—and you have the cheek to wear makeup?!"

He stomped through the illusory images. "This pimply face looks like the inside of a pomegranate! Let's see what wish you've made… Eh, 'I wish Sun-lang will love me forever'? If I were Sun-lang, I'd only love you if I were blind. Ugly ugly ugly, you've ruined my mood! Ugh, this old madam is at least forty-five, even older than I was when I died. What makes you think you should wish for fated love or children at your age. *Pfft!* Shameless!"

Gu Mang and Mo Xi looked at each other in silence. "I'll be honest. I want to beat him up," said Gu Mang.

Mo Xi shook his head. "Wait a little longer."

Shredded Cucumber swung his julienned dick around and continued to wander. Only when he finally spotted a few pretty girls did his tone soften. But his voice didn't sound any better this way—it was still reminiscent of a pig bladder, but this time a bladder full to bursting and in powerful need of release.

“This little girlie’s got such a tiny waist. She can have one,” he said before moving on.

“This one’s not bad either, with those big doe eyes. Look at the teardrop mole at the corner of her eye—delicious, heh heh.”

Every time he chose a woman, he reached out and slapped his hand toward her afterimage. The silhouette gradually merged into his body, as if his slap was some special mark of favor. Still, he made sure to mock these maidens’ wishes, ridiculing them or passing perverse judgments.

“Oh, you want to stay with your husband even when your hair’s gone white, to be surrounded by children.” Shredded Cucumber read the wish the woman had written on the peach-wood talisman and snickered. “Sorry, but you won’t get to be surrounded by children. Once I possess him, your husband’ll kick the bucket within a year. Your face is nice, though, so I’ll take your man’s body and leave you a baby. You’ll have one child for sure, heh.” He blew a kiss at her shadow and leered. “Why don’t you thank your dear husband, gorgeous?”

Mo Xi and Gu Mang’s expressions changed. *Possess him.*…?

It hit them at the same time. The rumors Su Qiao mentioned all made sense.

“So the prayers let this malevolent corpse possess the husbands’ bodies and take advantage of their wives,” Gu Mang murmured. “This ghost is of a lustful sort—its spiritual flow will indeed make it easier for a woman to conceive a child, but the price it demands is too high. Unless they figure out the source of their affliction, most men will die within a year due to the damage the ghost’s possession does to their vital energy.” He looked up at Mo Xi. “That’s why the wife’s looks make a difference, but the men’s don’t at all. That’s why those men all die bizarre and tragic deaths; that’s why Miss Su said this temple isn’t benevolent, but malicious. This explains everything.”

Mo Xi didn’t immediately respond. After a pause, he said, “Not everything. That couple from the merchant family in Chonghua that went missing—only the husband should have died, but in that case, both husband

and wife disappeared together.” He frowned, his gaze landing on the distant figure of Shredded Cucumber. “Why is that couple different from the rest?”

Gu Mang scratched his head. “Good point. Let’s keep watching.”

They turned their attention back to the scene before them. After a few minutes, Shredded Cucumber finished looking over all of the girls who’d come to pray that day. When he’d marked all the ones he wanted, the ghost waved a hand, dismissing the other silhouettes. He counted on his fingers and mumbled under his breath. “Hm, fourteen made the cut.” He snorted, wheezing through his sunken nose. “Not great, but not too bad. If I do five a night, it’ll only take three… No, there’ll be one fewer on the third night. Then I’ll just do two nights—wait, damn it, I’ll have a lot more each night if I do it in two—ah, whatever. I’ll sleep my way through all these women in two or three nights!” he said, cackling.

When he was done laughing, Shredded Cucumber started muttering to himself again. “Who should I pick for tonight’s batch? The past two days all I had was soft and tender little maidens. Time for something new. How about the spiciest one to switch things up…” He exhaled again, and the women’s silhouettes flitted past him once more, their illusory feet grazing the grass of the meadow.

At last, the roulette stopped on one hazy figure. “All right, it’ll be you!” Shredded Cucumber swatted a hand in the shadow’s direction. Red light splashed like fireworks, and the figure sharpened. A straight-backed and spirited silhouette appeared in the night—the afterimage of Gu Mang from earlier that day.

Gu Mang and Mo Xi were both rendered mute.

Shredded Cucumber walked a circle around Gu Mang’s image, then muttered, “Eh? This girl’s saucy enough, but why do I get the feeling something’s wrong with her? What’s off?”

Shit, thought Gu Mang. The illusion powder used one’s original features to create a temporary illusion of them as the opposite gender. This medicine was among the best of all disguise techniques; ordinary folk would never be able to tell the difference. But this pervert was clearly far from ordinary. The number of women he’d slept with likely far exceeded

the count of the strips of his julienned dick; he could indeed faintly sense something strange about that image of Gu Mang.

Fortunately, the illusion powder was a forbidden drug; its distribution was tightly controlled by the imperial palace of Chonghua. It wasn't readily given out to cultivators, so the possibility that this little lady was a man in disguise never occurred to the deviant Shredded Cucumber.

"Maybe she's *too* saucy? That waist, those legs, those muscles… She's got some fight in her." The old cucumber ghost paced around the image again, chuckling maliciously. "Looks like a *lot* of fun."

It was usually Gu Mang who was the pervert. Now, someone else was perving on him—it beggared belief. He ground his teeth. "I'm going to punch him right out of the wheel of reincarnation!"

"Wait a little longer," said Mo Xi.

Shredded Cucumber finished his study of Gu Mang, then turned to glance at the illusion of Mo Xi beside him. "This husband of hers is rather young and handsome." A wicked thought seemed to occur to him, and he grinned in delight, his smile hideous on his bloody face. "I can't let my chance to possess this man go to waste. With this face, I could have whichever girl I want. If I broke into someone's house and grabbed a pretty girl to play with, I doubt she'd even put up a fight. Heh heh heh, how nice, how nice!"

Mo Xi stared in disbelief.

Gu Mang arched a brow at him. "Still want to wait?"

Mo Xi didn't answer. He lowered his gaze and adjusted his vambrace. Before Gu Mang could react, a bolt of silver light arced from it—the hidden weapon compartment had been triggered, and a palm-sized bolt was whistling toward that lusty ghoul's head.

Mo-gongzi's figure flashed forward like dark lightning, darting before the corpse in the blink of an eye. With a single sharp kick, those steel-toed leather boots stomped through the corpse's rotten flesh, and the ghost collapsed to the ground.

Chapter Nine

MO XI'S MOVEMENTS flowed as smoothly as water, first dumbfounding Gu Mang then making him press a hand to his heart in delayed fear. This kid was unreal. He didn't show the slightest tell before attacking—he didn't even blink. But this wasn't the most important thing on Gu Mang's mind. The key question was…

Was that it? Wasn't it too unfair a fight?

Neither of them were entirely tender greenhorns. Though that old cucumber-ghost had fallen unmoving to the ground, they didn't drop their guard. They watched the corpse warily, knowing in their guts this wasn't the end.

After a moment, the corpse lurched stiffly to his feet. He charged at Mo Xi, his disgusting maw gaping wide.

It was a formidable charge—the lust ghoul's fleshy lips nearly grazed Mo-gongzi as he lunged forward. Thankfully, Mo-gongzi had fearsome martial skills, not merely dodging in time, but kicking out again in that same movement. This time, his boot stomped squarely on the ghoul's face.

The old cucumber ghost shrieked. "Goddamn it! It's fine if you want to hit me, but why must you hit my handsome face!"

This outburst was absurd enough to give Mo Xi pause.

"If you ruin my face, you're wrecking the dreams of countless ghost girls and ghost women!" he screeched. "You're spoiling the star of the underworld! Are you that jealous of my looks and charm?!"

Gu Mang couldn't help bursting into laughter, doubling over with mirth. "This ghost is pretty interesting! Mo-shidi, it's saying you're jealous of its looks."

Mo Xi was growing more annoyed by the minute. As his opponent railed at him, howling furiously with that julienned cucumber swinging between his legs, he hit his limit. He kicked the ghoul again and snapped, "What the hell do you think you're doing?!"

“Y-y-you—you kicked my face again! The entire ghost realm will remember you! You’re a wicked man, a cruel monster!”

This time, Gu Mang laughed so hard he fell over.

A chill wind rose. The cucumber ghost transformed into a cloud of black smoke and swooped toward Gu Mang. “Shit!” Gu Mang’s eyes widened. The ghost wasn’t dumb—it was creating a diversion!

As Gu Mang tensed to dodge the attack, a talisman flew up behind him. “Activate!” Mo Xi shouted.

Electricity crackled off the talisman. A thundercurse barrier came down around Gu Mang with a *boom*, shielding him within its hissing light.

Gu Mang started. New disciples had no weapons of their own during their trials, and all the weapons and talismans in their qiankun pouches were ones the elder had given them before the journey. There were only so many items within: a couple blades of regular iron, a few concealed bolts, and eleven paper talismans. Of those talismans, nine were for offense, and only two were these thundercurse barriers.

To think Mo Xi had used such a precious talisman on him…

Gu Mang stood within the barrier, gazing blankly at Mo Xi, who had resumed fighting with the cucumber ghost. Bewildered, Gu Mang blurted, “Why are you wasting a talisman on me? I’m your *senior,* remember?”

Mo Xi had unsheathed one of the iron blades and was locked in fierce combat with the cucumber ghost. He turned and snapped, “Didn’t you say you don’t know how to do anything and need me to take care of you?”

Gu Mang was stunned. *Bro! That was clearly a fucking joke!* Who would take such a dumb joke seriously?

Speechless, he looked on as Mo Xi flew and fought, feeling part exasperated, part amused, part anxious, part remorseful, but also just a little touched. He stood within the barrier, the black eyes under his long lashes focused on the fight. He had no plans to jump in for now; Mo-gongzi’s swordsmanship was fierce and decisive, without a trace of sloppiness. His sword flashed quicker and quicker, a dazzling blur in Mo Xi’s hand. The old cucumber ghost was no match for this young master.

But as Gu Mang observed, he felt that something was off—what was it?

Whoosh. Mo Xi's sword slashed through the corpse's waist, cleaving it in two. Black blood misted out. As Gu Mang watched intently, he realized what was wrong and flinched.

Every time Mo Xi landed a blow, the blood that fell left not a single mark—it disappeared the instant it touched the ground. This ghost was tricking them. That wasn't blood at all, but—

Head ringing, Gu Mang shouted, "Mo Xi, come here!"

Mo Xi lifted his snow-bright iron blade, turning his elegant face to the moonlight. His dark eyes darted toward Gu Mang, but he didn't understand the meaning behind Gu Mang's words. He genuinely saw Gu Mang as a useless shijie he had to shield in battle, someone whose reactions he didn't put much stock in.

Gu Mang's face had drained of color. "Come here and get behind the barrier!"

Before Mo Xi could reply, he smelled the thick scent of blood wafting up from behind. He turned back in time to see a rotting corpse burst from the ground, charging at him in a cloud of dirt. Mo Xi raised his blade, but the corpse was quicker, its teeth sinking into his arm. Grunting, Mo Xi slapped a detonation talisman on the corpse's forehead, then pulled his bitten arm away and leapt clear.

There was an earth-shaking *boom* as the corpse was blown into dust. Pale and panting, Mo Xi looked down at his injured arm. "You stay over there!" he snapped at Gu Mang.

"What are you saying?! You—"

"Don't move!" Seeing that Gu Mang wasn't listening, Mo Xi pointed at the thundercurse barrier. A soaring snake sigil appeared upon it: the full-body paralysis curse only pure-blooded nobles could cast or lift. Mo Xi's chest was heaving. A few inky strands had escaped his neat bun to frame his coolly elegant face. He swallowed thickly and gritted his teeth. "Stay in there," he warned.

By now, he too had realized what was wrong. The cucumber ghost that bled black smoke wasn't his real body at all. As the saying went, a clever rabbit had three burrows. After that pervert realized he was no match for Mo Xi, he'd used the strikes Mo Xi landed to disperse his spiritual form and soak into the ground in the guise of flying blood. In reality, the ghost was silently sinking into the mud, waiting to attack the instant Mo Xi let down his guard.

Mo Xi bit his lip, watching a haze of purple-black qi issue from the bite and crawl up his arm. His brow creased and his breathing turned ragged. This ghost had been far too cunning. Mo Xi could tell the corpse he'd just blown to pieces with the detonation talisman wasn't the real ghost at all. The creature seemed to have a special ability that allowed him to hide within other objects, such as the soil or even…

Mo Xi closed his eyes, sweat beading on his forehead. Or even himself.

"Yes, pretty gege, you're right!" A piercing cackle broke the night's silence. The voice belonged to the old cucumber ghost, but it was somehow coming from Mo Xi's own body.

Mo Xi opened his eyes and glared viciously down at the wound on his arm. At some point, the gash had turned into a bloody mouth, opening and closing to reveal the red of his raw flesh. "I'm inside you—who cares if you're a cultivator? Didn't I possess you all the same? Ha ha ha!"

"Get the hell out!" Mo Xi raged.

"I can't beat you with brute force, so it's much safer to hide within your body. I'm not stupid—why should I leave? To give you more free target practice?"

The ghost's attitude stoked the flames of Mo Xi's fury. He drew a dagger from his qiankun pouch and clenched his jaw, prepared to gouge the thing right out of his arm.

Gu Mang watched in mounting horror. But he was bound by the Mo Clan's restraint spell; he couldn't move a muscle. Mo Xi had ruthlessly sealed even his voice. This type of forbidden spell had been developed long ago as a tool to help nobles more easily rule over commoners, rendering its

target immobile for an hour or more. Unless the spellcaster themselves—or another of noble blood—lifted it, the victim could only wait it out.

As Mo Xi brought the point of that blade to his own arm, ready to dig into flesh, the mouth opened again in deranged laughter. “Go ahead and stab yourself! Do you think you’ll be free of me when you cut out this wound? Little lordling, you’re so naive. My malevolent qi has spread throughout your whole body. Even with spiritual energy, you won’t be able to hold out for long. Soon you’ll be just like those other men I possessed—you’ll lose your awareness and rationality; I’ll have you at my mercy! Ha ha ha!”

Mo Xi bit down on his whitening lower lip. This cucumber ghost was right—he could already feel himself growing feverish, his head beginning to spin. But Mo Xi was proud. His uncle Mo Xianting had tried to break him in countless ways yet failed to expose the slightest weakness. How could he possibly succumb to a lust spirit whose dick had been sliced into shreds? With a bloodless complexion and a raspy voice, Mo Xi said slowly, “Not on your life.”

“Not on my…what? Heh heh, Young Master, you’re smart and stubborn, I’ll give you that, but you’re no match for my qi. Once you lose your mind, you’ll have to let me do whatever I want with your body. I’ll use you to commit all manner of lewd and vile acts, ha ha! The pleasures of the flesh can blunt the sharpest blade—when the time comes, you might even thank me!”

Mo Xi’s breath was coming fast now, his vision beginning to darken. Still he tried to resist, leaning back against the ancient peach tree and panting as he looked up at its branches. “You’ll do nothing of the sort.”

“Heh, stubborn to the end! I’m impressed.”

The ghost seemed to redouble his efforts to take over Mo Xi’s body. Mo Xi made a muffled sound and turned his head, looking toward Gu Mang with eyes as black as the abyss. “The Mo Clan’s restraint barrier is more than capable of staying up for an hour,” he said. “Even if you possess me, you won’t…” His chest heaved. He closed his eyes and swallowed with effort before continuing. “You won’t be able to touch a single hair on her

head. Not to mention, do you really think…an hour won't be enough time for her to figure out how to defeat a sneak like you?"

"Ha ha, Young Master, you're too funny! After I possess you, I'll naturally use your body to release the restraint on her! This beauty you've brought with you is so pretty, and I bet she's wild in bed. And she's your wife? Using your body to sleep with your wife is only proper!" That bloody mouth grew excited, its tongue making ravenous smacking sounds. "Scared, huh? Ha ha, there's no use being scared. I've already possessed you; everything you do will be futile!"

Mo Xi closed his eyes and gasped for breath. Before that vengeful ghost could react, his eyes snapped open, those dark pupils contracting as he reached up. With a *pop*, he dislocated the fingers of his left hand.

It was a chilling sight. No one had expected the situation to take such a turn. Mo Xi looked up, his pale face filled with an irrepressible viciousness. "In your dreams!" he gritted out.

"You—!"

"My fingers are dislocated—my body won't be able to form any sigils," Mo Xi said darkly, lowering his gaze. "Do as you wish."

That bloody mouth fell silent. After a beat, it laughed madly. "Ha ha! Very well! You win this one! But even if this barrier of yours will protect your little darling, can it protect all the women in the village?"

Mo Xi's eyes flew open, his gaze like cold lightning. "You wouldn't dare!"

"Of course I would, I'm a fuckin' lust spirit who takes my pick from thousands of women. Why wouldn't I dare?"

"You…" Between his own apoplectic fury and the spiritual possession, Mo Xi was momentarily rendered mute. Not a single word made it past his lips, though those long and thick lashes trembled.

"You ruined my fun tonight, so I'll go whoring in your body and fuck seven or eight girls. If you don't die of rage, I'll ruin your life, heh!"

The fever burned through him. The hand Mo Xi could still move was pressed to the ground, fingers sinking deep in the mud. He said no more.

Sweat sheened his brow as he strove with all he had to stave off the demon's incursion.

He managed to hold out for several more minutes before his eyes started to haze. In that last moment, he looked at Gu Mang across the barrier. His face was pale, his chest rising and falling with rapid breaths, his eyes scarlet yet brimming with tears from the pain. Lips quivering, he mumbled, "You have to…stop me…"

The black and purple malevolent qi spiraled up from his arm. His head hung limply, and beneath those scattered wisps of hair, that handsome, chiseled face held no flicker of life.

Gu Mang brought nearly every bit of spiritual energy he could command to bear and broke through the body-binding curse on the barrier. "Mo-shidi!" he shouted sharply.

No response came.

"Mo Xi!"

After a long moment, Mo Xi's fingertips twitched, and his eyes snapped open. When he looked up, however, his pupils were already an unnatural scarlet.

A shiver of apprehension went through Gu Mang. He tried to speak again, but he was once again frozen by the Mo Clan's barrier; he could neither say a word nor move a muscle. He was reduced to watching helplessly as Mo Xi stood up and walked toward the city beneath the silver sickle of the moon.

Chapter Ten

XINGXIANG CITY. Mansion of Charms.

It should have taken less than an hour to get here, but it had taken Mo Xi far, far longer than that. Fury burned in his chest, interwoven with lust. He was being controlled, possessed, and dragged against his will to precisely the type of place he despised. That evil spirit within him wanted to make him commit every wanton act imaginable. If he hadn't put everything into resisting—even regaining control several times—he would have long fallen into the abyss of desire.

Yet he still inevitably arrived at this brothel on the outskirts of the city. Though he had momentary control of himself and hadn't yet done anything absurd, he knew it wouldn't stay this way for long.

"Gongzi, where are you from?"

"Heh, Gongzi, why aren't you looking at us? First time? Are you shy?"

His vision was blurry; the figures of beautiful women flickered before his eyes, and the thick scent of makeup seemed to envelop him as he sat at a table in one of the brothel's rooms. He was fighting that ghost in every moment, yet whenever he regained the slightest control, the agony in his body ate away at him, shredding his lucidity and filling him with pain. After watching him repeat this cycle several times, the brothel girls had grown alarmed by his erratic movements. The ghoul within him wanted him to plunder those soft, pale bodies, while his struggling consciousness churned with fury and loathing.

"Get the hell out! All of you, get the *hell* out!" he shouted one minute. Then, "No… Come back… All of you come back!"

His torment worsened as his mind and that of the ghost battled for dominance, his behavior so strange the poor women were frightened out of their wits. When Mo Xi grabbed one of the girls, she figured he was one of those inexplicable clients who did as they pleased. Thus, after an initial

startled cry, she pressed her supple body into Mo-gongzi's embrace. The other women surrounding them giggled as she wrapped her arms fluidly around Mo Xi's neck and dipped her head, ready to kiss him on the mouth.

Suppressing his violent trembling, Mo Xi wrenched his face aside, eyes scarlet. His unharmed hand groped for one of the teacups on the table and shattered it in his grip. He clutched the shards and slashed them across the palm of his other hand.

The maidens shrieked, pretty faces blanching as they stared at him in horror. "Young Master, what… What are you—"

Mo Xi swallowed thickly, his lashes fluttering. A sickly flush suffused his pale face. He tightened his grip on those bloody shards, speaking two words that seemed to have been squeezed from the darkness of desire. "Get…out…"

"Young Master?"

"All of you…get out."

He felt that malevolent lust rising again. Gritting his teeth, he stabbed into the middle of his palm once more. Blood ran. He looked up through crimson eyes, his pale lips bitten bloody, everything a mess of shocking scarlet. Mo Xi slammed a hand down on the table behind him, making the cups rattle. "Get the hell out!" he snarled.

The maidens staggered toward the door. But to their horror, they found that there was vicious qi sealing it. Terrified screams rang out.

"What happened?!"

"Why can't we open the door?" someone sobbed.

Mo Xi hadn't expected the demon would take the drastic step of locking him inside a room with these women. Another surge of furious hatred and disgust filled him. His ears rang, that syrupy voice slithering in like a wet tongue: "Handsome gege, why don't you give up? Why make things so hard for yourself? Look at these girls—are they not beautiful? Are they not pleasing?"

"Get lost!" Mo Xi raged.

“Get lost? Heh heh, what right do you have to tell *me* to get lost? Did you know? In possessing you, I can smell the brutality—the viciousness—in your bones. Little lordling, you have an innate desire for dominance; you hunger for control. You wish to take what you want by force…”

The agony forced Mo Xi’s eyes shut. Hands tremoring, he clenched his jaw. “Fuck…off…”

“Heh, don’t be angry. You’re still young—there are many forms of pleasure you’ve yet to experience. I, on the other hand, have possessed hundreds and thousands of men. The moment I made a home in your flesh, I sensed all the hidden shadows and hungry yearnings in your heart. Young Master Mo, you haven’t realized it yet, but the darkness within you is deeper than you think.

“Come,” the voice continued. “The gap between a gentleman and a monster is but a single step. Come, I’ll take you over it. You’ll thank me later.” He laughed. “I’ll give you a taste of human passion and carnal desire—I’ll tear open your true heart and let you recognize yourself for what you are.”

The ghost’s voice swirled and echoed, like a crow’s feather spiraling down from the sky. “Actually, you’re no different from me. No—you’re even more terrifying than I am. Doesn’t it hurt? Doesn’t it *burn*? Don’t you crave relief? As soon as you stop resisting, I’ll let you experience the best feelings on earth—women…lust…indulgen—”

The smug voice fell silent. Mo Xi had used all of his strength to jump to his feet. With one hand, he yanked on the glass beads dangling from the corner of the table; channeling all his focus, he hurled them at those women crying in a heap by the door. Each bead hit them perfectly on their acupoints, knocking them unconscious. They slumped haphazardly across the floor.

Mo Xi had spent all of his energy to complete this act. He grabbed the edge of the table and fell heavily back into a seat. His vision spun, and he seemed to be floating above his body. With a bloodstained hand, he grabbed that piece of broken crockery once more and stabbed himself decisively in the palm and leg. It hurt, but the pain cleared his mind.

He did it once, and then again. His vision was going hazy. He could no longer see what was in front of him; his ears were filled with a ringing that crowded out everything else. He didn't know how much time was passing. He wasn't sure if he was still conscious, or how long he could hold on for.

As his awareness faded, he seemed to hear Gu Mang's voice cry, "Mo Xi!"

An hour earlier, at the burial grounds, Gu Mang had broken through the thundercurse barrier the instant the restraint spell wore off. Ignoring the stiffness in his limbs, he formed a tracking sigil. "Spirit hound, point the way!"

The golden-red glow broke from the talisman paper pinned between his fingers, transforming into the shape of a hunting dog. Gu Mang commanded the hound: "Track Mo Xi; find out where he ended up."

The spirit hound bayed once, sniffing in a circle, then bounded away on its golden paws, hurtling into the darkness.

Gu Mang followed the spirit hound for more than three miles. He passed over creeks and through fields, barren lands, and a few small villages, all the way to nearby Xingxiang City. This was the closest city to Lotus Village. Though it was nothing compared to the size of the capital, it was prosperous; even at this late hour, people still walked the streets. Young couples wandered the alleys together and rugged men sat by the road, drinking and eating. There was no shortage of cultivators in their midst, stopping for a rest as they passed through.

The spirit hound threaded its way through this crowd of people, leaving a trail of golden pawprints in its wake. At last, it stopped before the door of a colorfully decorated building and bayed again.

"This is the spot?" Gu Mang asked.

The dog yipped an affirmative.

Gu Mang nodded, then reached out and returned the hound to the talisman. Yet as he approached the door, a slim, pale arm reached out to

stop him.

“Miss, stop right there. The Mansion of Charms is not a place a maiden like you can enter.” A woman in a flowing, jade-green robe with an outer layer of white gauze floating over her wide skirt stepped gracefully out of the doorway. She was nibbling on pumpkin seeds, her delicate features set in a moue of disdain.

“I’m looking for someone,” said Gu Mang.

“Of course you are. Men come to us for pleasure, and women come to us for revenge. Aiyo, please; we’re a small business, we can’t handle that sort of trouble. When you start yelling and throwing furniture, we’re the ones who foot the bill.”

Gu Mang blinked in surprise. His pretty black eyes shifted from the woman to the building behind her. Rescue had been the only thing on his mind; it seemed several details had eluded him. He hadn’t taken a good look at the establishment the hound had led him to. Only in this moment did he realize it was a brothel, and that the woman before him had the gaudy look of a courtesan.

“Go home, okay? Meimei, if you really want to make your lover pay, it’s best to wait until morning to settle things.”

Gu Mang hadn’t anticipated this development. He was a born prankster and was more likely to spout nonsense than not, but he wasn’t truly an irresponsible fellow. He’d never expected anyone to take his jokes this seriously. He’d cheerfully quipped that he didn’t know a thing and needed protection, and this little young master had swallowed every word. Gu Mang couldn’t help blaming himself. What had possessed him to play games with such a serious person? Lu Zhanxing was right. If a different shixiong had come with Mo-shidi—Jiang Yexue or Murong Chuyi—nothing like this would’ve happened.

He bit his lower lip and glanced up at that brightly lit brothel. Amid the bubbling laughter of courtesans welcoming clients, he turned and ducked into the closest empty alleyway.

“Ah, what’s gotten into these girls recently? They can’t keep their man’s attention from wandering, so they come here looking for trouble.”

After shooing Gu Mang away, that courtesan in green turned to gossip with her friend nearby, chewing on more pumpkin seeds. “How many have I turned away this month?”

“That’s the seventh one, isn’t it? Actually, that lass was pretty cute. Why d’you think she can’t keep her man from straying?”

“What else can it be? The sisters here are too beautiful.”

The courtesan giggled. “You’re right. We’ve got all the charms. That girl had good looks, but on second thought, her features were too strong. And she didn’t know how to make the most of her looks. She wasn’t wearing a speck of makeup; of course she’d seem bland.”

“Don’t you think she was rather too tall? Hugging a girl like that wouldn’t be very comfortable.”

“No wonder her lover came running to us.”

The courtesans twittered and chattered, giggling furiously. They were too busy amusing themselves to notice the figure who walked out of the nearby alley until he came to a stop right in front of them. “Sorry to interrupt, ladies—may I go in?”

They glanced up carelessly, only to be struck dumb, one after another. A handsome youth stood in the light of the red silk lanterns. He was straight-backed and broad-shouldered, with long legs, a sharp nose, and slightly pursed lips. His dazzling black eyes were gorgeous, gazing down at them with a shadow of anxiety and unease. His features seemed familiar, as if they’d seen him not long ago—but where? Such a beautiful man should have been unforgettable.

“So, um, may I go in?” Seeing the courtesans with mouths agog, the man repeated his question with a hint of urgency.

The girls at last came back to their senses. Each enthusiastically began to scramble to claim this client for herself. “Of course, of course, absolutely! Why not?”

“Young Master, step right this way. Is this your first time here?”

“Does the young master have a maiden in mind? How do I look, what about me? For such a strapping young man, I’ll waive the tea fees.”

“Um, I’m not—”

“Young Master, don’t be embarrassed, let’s get to know each other better.”

The youth swarmed by colorful butterflies was of course none other than Gu Mang, who’d dispelled the illusion powder and changed back into men’s clothes. Gu Mang followed the courtesans inside, politely fending them off as he swept a quick glance over the main hall. Seeing no sign of Mo Xi, he looked toward the staircase leading up to the second floor and recited a silent incantation, concentrating on reading the flow of spiritual energy. Strong ghostly energy was emanating from a certain room.

Gu Mang turned with and apologetic smile. “Sorry ladies, I won’t trouble you for your company tonight. I have a friend waiting for me upstairs. I need to find them.”

“Your friend? So the young master already has a maiden he likes in the building?”

“Aiya, are we not pretty enough? We can’t catch the young master’s eye?”

Gu Mang was burning with anxiety over Mo Xi’s safety. He avoided the girls’ eyes as he pushed through the crowd, wishing he could turn invisible and rush upstairs to pull Mo Xi out. When he’d extricated himself at last, he turned to smile at those lovely, pouting faces. “Of course not, all of you are beautiful. It’s just that I’ve already made plans for today… Next time—next time I’ll come by myself to play with you.”

The courtesans were crestfallen, but since he’d refused them so nicely, they could only sigh. “Ah, all right then.”

“I’m so jealous of the girl he’s looking for! I wonder which sister it is?”

“I don’t know; we can’t snoop into a client’s personal business…”

Gu Mang followed the trail of malevolent qi to a tightly closed sandalwood door. He reached out, sensing the curse upon it before his fingers even brushed the wood. No regular clients would be able to get

close. Stomach knotted with worry, he gathered his spiritual energy and sent the door banging open with a savage kick. “Mo Xi!”

The smell hit him first: the sickly sweet scent of makeup. The room was a dazzling expanse of scarlet—the carpet, bedding, gauze canopy, and candles were all red, and the five women who’d come to serve were clad in crimson as well. At the moment, all of them were collapsed upon the carpet embroidered with colorful butterflies, completely insensate. It was clear that their acupoints had been struck.

Mo Xi was sprawled over the table, the only spot in the entire room that lacked color. He was still conscious, but he reacted not at all to Gu Mang’s voice.

“Mo-shidi! Mo-shidi!”

Mo Xi felt wreathed in a haze. Someone seemed to be calling him from across a vast distance of mountains and rivers. Mo Xi turned, vaguely curious—was there really such a person, really someone calling for him? He wasn’t sure. Since his father had passed, no one in the world had shouted his name with such care and worry.

“Mo Xi!”

Suddenly, someone was helping him up from the table. He had the impression of an indistinct figure; thinking it was another brothel girl, he instinctively shook his head, trying to break free. But this girl was astonishingly strong, pulling him to his feet and propping him upright with a brusque efficiency that brooked no argument. The two of them took a few shaky steps.

Mo Xi mumbled through white, bloodstained lips, “Where…where are we going?”

“I’m helping you to the bed. Lie down and rest a while. Everything will be okay now, it’s all okay.”

As soon as Mo Xi registered the word *bed*, he dug his heels in. “N-not the bed… Let go… Go away…”

“It’s okay now, Mo Xi, don’t move. You’ve lost way too much blood…”

“I won’t go… Get away from me, don’t try me, go away…” He coughed. “Stay away from me!”

But the hazy figure didn’t listen to him at all. The stranger helped the half-conscious Mo Xi lie down on the soft bed. Mo Xi flung out a hand, wanting to push them away, trying to resist their efforts and tumble off the bed instead. But his bloodied palm was held in place by a strong and sturdy hand.

The stranger embraced him. Their arms were so powerful—not like a maiden’s, but rather a…

Before Mo Xi could finish the thought, he felt a hand stroking his hair, murmuring a stream of soothing words. “It’s all right now, it’s all over. I’m here, I’m here.”

“M’not going to bed.”

“Okay, no going to bed.” Despite his words, Gu Mang scooped Mo Xi up in his arms and laid him on the bed, cajoling him the entire time. “No bed, to hell with the bed. All right, all right, everything’s okay. It was all Shixiong’s fault, Shixiong shouldn’t have messed with you.”

Gu Mang carefully held Mo Xi’s bloody hand, turning over that mangled palm with an ache in his heart. His voice softened further. “You’re all right now, Shidi. You’ve done very well. Let me handle the rest.”

Tormented beyond endurance, Mo Xi opened his eyes. He saw a crimson bed canopy and a swaying bead veil, and beside him, a blurry silhouette. He couldn’t make out the stranger’s face no matter how he tried, just as he couldn’t identify the noises around him. Yet his other senses were magnifying themselves unceasingly—he couldn’t see the features of the person holding his hand, but he could vividly smell the scent coming off their body and feel the temperature of their skin. The snug warmth of their palms touching made his vision flash white.

He looked up, chest heaving as he rasped, “Let go…”

“Mo Xi…”

Perhaps the scent of their body was too pleasing, or maybe the touch of their skin was too electrifying, or possibly that evil ghost’s desires had

finally corroded a path to Mo Xi's heart—all he felt was a fire burning ever hotter within him. He balled his other hand into a fist and punched the bedding, but his knuckles sank into the soft quilts, and he felt not the slightest pain.

Mo Xi's mouth felt unbearably dry, his sanity eroding. Hoarsely, almost despairingly, he cried, "Let go of me—get away from me… Get *lost*!"

But the stranger didn't leave, quietly murmuring an incantation instead. Wisps of blue light began to twine around their interlocked fingers. Endless irritation and anxiety gathered in the pit of Mo Xi's stomach. His throat felt as if it was being roasted over a fire as he gritted his teeth in frustration and said, "You…"

"It'll be over soon."

"If you don't leave… I'll…"

"I'm so sorry. I shouldn't have lied to you. I really was just joking with you before." That person's voice was low and husky, gentle and whisper-soft. "I should have been the one protecting you, but I made you shield me like a fool instead. Some shixiong I've been…"

A hand stroked Mo Xi's burning cheek, caressing it. "I owe you an apology."

But Mo Xi couldn't hear a word. The frustration in his chest was burning him from the inside out. Those murmuring lips were an unfamiliar temptation tugging at his subconscious, filling him with a terrible urgency he'd never before known. He had no idea how to suppress or extinguish it, and so that wildfire scorched the skies, eating up his resistance with startling speed.

That terrifying instinct finally gained the upper hand over his deteriorating rationality. Mo Xi panted, the rims of his eyes reddening as he shoved the stranger down.

Before Gu Mang could react, the world spun around him. He found himself tumbled onto the crimson bedding, eyes wide as he stared up at the youth above him. Mo Xi wasn't yet as tall as he was, but his strength was

shocking. His chest worked violently; Gu Mang could practically hear his heart pounding within it. Those black eyes were bewildered yet fierce, burning with a desire that had thawed their usual icy restraint as they looked down at him in helpless confusion.

“Shidi, you—!”

His shock was sealed by an impetuous, forceful kiss. Mindless, Mo Xi pinned him down and licked hungrily past Gu Mang’s parted lips, his heated breath fanning over Gu Mang’s face. His movements were sharp and frustrated, like an outpouring of lava that’d been buried in the rock for too long. It was less of a kiss and more of a vicious bite. Gu Mang’s lips were quickly bloody, the taste of copper spreading as their tongues slid against each other.

Hidden in crimson drapes, tangled among the bedsheets—the kiss had come out of nowhere, and was beyond anything they had imagined. Both their minds had gone blank.

Delirious, Mo Xi heard the voice of the ghost emerging from the bottom of his heart. It whispered smugly, “Look, don’t you see now? You’re neither a saint nor a gentleman. Everyone has a beast inside them, and the one you’ve leashed within your heart is darker and more twisted than that of anyone I’ve possessed. You’ve never set it free, that’s all. But, heh, now that you’ve tasted it, there’ll come a day when you’ll—”

Whatever he was about to say was lost as that vengeful ghost screamed like a cat grabbed by the neck. The ghost exploded into curses, madness shrill in his voice. “Fuck! You people! What right do you have to capture me?! Pure-blooded noble this, young master of a famous house that —you’re all the same! In the face of desire, are any of you purer than I?!”

Chapter Eleven

WHEN MO XI WOKE, he found himself lying in a bed in Lotus Village's little inn. The evening before seemed like an absurd nightmare.

The small window engraved with flowers had been pushed open, and light spilled in sideways to gild the balsam flower within the ceramic vase on the table in its gentle glow. Dust danced in the beam of sunlight as his distant gaze gathered focus.

Suddenly he sat bolt upright on the bed as the events of the previous night rushed through him like a crushing wave. His memories were fragmented; he had no continuous recollection of what had happened after he was possessed, but he remembered enough. His head hurt fit to burst. He reached out to press his fingers to the pulsing veins at his temple, only to find his hand thickly bandaged in gauze, his dislocated fingers popped back into place.

Mo Xi gazed dumbly at his own hand. A stranger had come in yesterday, at the end. It had been a man, and…

He thought of that kiss that scarcely deserved the name and immediately tensed. The memory slowly surfaced, and the blood drained from his face.

The door creaked open. Mo Xi's head jerked up, his bloodshot gaze slicing toward the newcomer like a sharp sword. "You—"

The one who'd come in was the very youth who'd appeared the previous night. Then, Mo Xi hadn't been able to see his face clearly, but he had rarely been so sure of anything. His scowl was a terrible sight. "You were never…" he gritted out. "You were always…"

"Ah, right. I'm Gu Mang, but not Gu Mang-shijie—I'm Gu Mang-shixiong." The youth flicked him a glance. "As I think you've already realized."

He closed the door with a mirthless chuckle before crossing to Mo Xi's bed and reaching for his forehead. Mo Xi instinctively shrank from that

touch, yet was so overcome with anger that not only did he fail to successfully dodge Gu Mang's hand, his vision went dark and he nearly fainted.

Mo Xi was beyond furious. After catching his breath, he reached out with the hand that had been bundled into a bear paw and pushed Gu Mang away. A raging flame burned in his chest; he was on the verge of spitting blood. This Gu asshole was perfectly capable of fighting, yet he'd claimed he was a useless weakling. He was a man, but he'd never confessed the truth the whole way here. Instead, he'd teased Mo Xi in all sorts of ways; he even…

Mo Xi started coughing. His fury had choked him before he could say a thing.

"You just woke up; you're still recovering. If you want to curse me out, it'll have to wait until you're healthy."

"Get out…"

"Hey, I came here to apologize. I don't think you heard me yesterday…"

Things would have been fine if Gu Mang hadn't mentioned the events of the day before, but as soon as he did, Mo Xi started coughing even more violently. A furious, humiliated flush rose on his pale face as his razor-sharp eyes stabbed hatefully into the culprit. The muscle working in his jaw was astonishingly visible on his elegant features.

Gu Mang shut his mouth upon seeing his expression. After a moment, a vanishingly rare blush appeared on that damnable scoundrel's face. He mumbled, "I'm really, really sorry…"

Mo Xi had been ready to say more, but found his gaze suddenly drawn to Gu Mang's lips. Gu-shixiong's lips were bleeding pitifully, as if some beast had savaged him. Putting this observation together with his own memories of the evening before, Mo Xi realized the beast was none other than himself.

His face went sickly green. He looked down, long lashes fluttering. A few moments passed before he said without looking up, "I didn't do it on

purpose.”

“What?”

After a stretch of silence, Mo Xi’s head shot back up, his flickering black pupils bringing to mind the dust glimmering in that slanting beam of sunlight. He braced himself. “I remember what happened yesterday.”

Gu Mang blinked.

“I didn’t intend to do it.”

Even Gu Mang found this situation unbearably awkward, but he was unwilling to admit his embarrassment. He chuckled with feigned carelessness. “Ah, of course you didn’t. Anyway, you didn’t really kiss me, you bit me—it was just that you happened to bite my mouth. That’s not how kissing works at all. I’ve kissed lots of girls; you can trust me on this one.”

Mo Xi looked at him in silence.

Gu Mang laughed dryly. “Especially since we’re both guys. So what if we kissed? No one took advantage of anyone else.” He shot a hesitant glance at Mo Xi, who still wore an awful expression, and carefully offered, “What if…you rinsed your mouth?”

Still no reply. A nerve-racking silence stretched between them. At last, Mo Xi mercifully brought an end to this topic that humiliated them both. “What about the ghost?” he asked. “Did you capture him?”

“Ah—yes, I used a spell to draw him out of your body and trapped him in a wooden doll.”

“Get it out. I have some questions.”

“Right now?” Gu Mang widened his eyes. “You’d better not—you were just possessed by a vengeful ghost and fought him for hours. Even if you’re a pure-blooded noble and your life isn’t in danger, I could tell your vital energy was harmed when I checked your pulse last night. Rest first. Even if you interrogate him now, you won’t get any coherent answers out of him.”

“Why not?”

“Because of you, of course. Yesterday, you resisted him with everything you had; the mental backlash he felt was pretty violent. It seems he didn’t realize it when he was in your body, but when I took him out, his soul was scattered. I’d be surprised if he can manage any corporeal form before tomorrow morning.” Gu Mang sighed. “You were really impressive. You held out for so long even after being possessed, and you didn’t touch a single one of those girls.”

Mo Xi shot him an icy glare.

Gu Mang sat down beside the bed and seized his opportunity to finish his apology. “Ah… But I really meant it when I said I was sorry. I hid my identity from you this whole time and made you endure such an ordeal to save me. If your self-discipline wasn’t so good, I’d be in big trouble.”

“I won’t beg the elders for leniency on your behalf.”

Gu Mang sat stunned for a moment, then smiled. He stuck out his arm toward Mo Xi. “No need to plead with the elders—you can even beat me however you’d like. Shixiong won’t retaliate.”

Indifferently, Mo Xi glanced at that arm as if he really were planning to beat him up. Gu Mang immediately wailed in the most shameless way. “Ah! Oww!”

Mo Xi hadn’t moved. He raised a bandaged hand and said, expressionless, “I haven’t even hit you yet.”

“Oh.”

Although Mo Xi had woken naturally, his body had been badly affected by the malevolent qi, and he was still exhausted. Not long after Gu Mang sat down to speak with him, he noticed Mo Xi flagging. In the indirect sunlight, his elegant features appeared alarmingly pallid. He got to his feet. “You should sleep. I’ll stop bothering you.”

Mo Xi didn’t immediately answer. Beneath his straight nose, those pale lips were slightly pursed. Finally, his lashes fluttered, and he asked scornfully, “So you’re not the delicate Gu-shijie anymore?”

Gu Mang rubbed his nose awkwardly and coughed. “Only the handsome and formidable Gu-shixiong.”

“I see the shixiong part, but not the rest.”

“Yes, yes, whatever you say.” Gu Mang smiled helplessly. “Hurry up and go back to sleep.”

Black eyes like deep oceans gazed back at him.

“Rest well,” said Gu Mang.

Mo Xi closed his eyes and didn’t reply. Gu Mang blinked, then edged closer for a better look. Mo Xi had fallen asleep. The back of his head rested against the headboard, his face cocked slightly to the side and his shallow breaths setting his eyelashes aflutter. Like this, he looked very young. Though his visage was much more solemn than those of others his age, the lines of his jaw still held some of the softness that belonged to youth.

Gu Mang’s gaze skimmed lower, landing on Mo Xi’s lips before quickly flicking elsewhere. Gu Mang couldn’t reconcile this haughty young master with the youth who’d lost control last night. He could find no hint of that passion, that ferocity, or that violence. This young man’s lips were thin and pale, the picture of asceticism, but when they had been on his…

Hold on—what was he thinking?

Gu Mang touched his own mouth yet again. He rose and eased Mo Xi properly into bed, then pulled the thin blanket snugly over him and drew the pale blue bed canopy shut.

“Xuanwu Protective Array. Alarm Barrier. Dream-Tapir Pillow Companion.”

Only after invoking all three formations in succession did Gu Mang step out of the room. Seeing the corridor deserted, he produced a little figurine carved of foxglove-tree wood from his qiankun pouch. The doll was roughly hewn and only the size of a fist; not only were its eyes mismatched, its mouth was crooked as well. At first, the figurine lay flat and motionless in Gu Mang’s hand, but as soon as Gu Mang untied the red string around its neck, it hopped to its feet. Rubbing its eyes, the little doll began to shriek. “Y-y-you! You beast! You crossdressing bastard! Let me out of this damn wooden doll! Otherwise, I—I’ll—”

This doll was the new home of the cucumber ghost, his vital spirit sealed.

“You’ll do what?” Gu Mang set the figurine on the windowsill and snorted. “Jump off the building and die, or start committing murder and arson?”

The cucumber ghost—or perhaps better dubbed the little figurine—shrieked with fury and plunked itself down on the windowsill.

“You’re a wily old fox, vicious and cunning,” said Gu Mang. “You tricked Mo-shidi because he’s inexperienced, but you’d best not try that with me. Do you think we cultivation academy students can’t handle a single evil ghost like you?”

The little doll kicked its stubby legs. “No! You bully the weak—you’re no gentleman at all!”

Gu Mang had no shame. He gasped in feigned shock. “Not a gentleman? You’re right. I’m a bastard and a rogue from head to toe—how did you know? Now, can you guess what this bastard is going to do next? I’ll let you in on the plan.” Gu Mang stared fixedly down at the little doll with his arms crossed. “I’m going to lock you in the eighteenth level of the demon-suppressing tower. We throw countless vengeful spirits and rampaging demons in there, all of them highly cultivated experts. Inside, all your ethereal and corporeal souls will be gnawed to nothingness. You’ve been committing your evil deeds for so long—it’ll be perfect vengeance for those unfortunate couples.”

The doll refused to be intimidated. “When did I commit any evil deeds? Little cultivator, have you not heard others calling me a local fertility god?”

“This again?”

“Bestowing a child is worth a thousand karmic merits, I—augh!”

Gu Mang had picked the little doll up. Narrowing his eyes, he said, “I’m not joking. I’m dead serious.”

Only then did the little doll finally start to panic. “No, don’t!” it yelled. “Xiao-gege, kind cultivator, big beauty, let’s talk it out, okay? The

eighteenth level of that something-or-other tower is filled with big bosses and I’m just a little ghost. Why don’t we pick a different floor? How does the first one sound?”

“Good idea. The creature on the first floor is an ancient and malevolent beast. It does seem a little lonely in there all on its own. I’m shocked you’d volunteer to keep it company.”

“Aaah! No! Then the second floor, Dage, what about the second floor?”

“Are you trying to negotiate?”

“Yep, that’s right, xiao-gege, kind cultivator, big beauty, just spare my life. I don’t want to dissolve into ashes on the wind! Look, if nothing else, I complimented you from the bottom of my heart when you were dolled up as a girl, didn’t I?”

“Then I certainly must thank you.”

“You’re so very welcome.”

Gu Mang tossed him back onto the sill and said sternly, “Answer the following questions properly. Lie once, and you can take your pick of either the first or eighteenth floor.”

“Yes, yes yes!”

“First question. Last month, a young couple from the capital of Chonghua went missing. Before they disappeared, they came to Lotus Village to pray for a child. Did you see them?”

The little doll pouted. “I see so many temple-goers each day. How would I remember—”

“Think carefully. When you possess people, those without spiritual energy die from the organ damage caused by your yin energy. This gave people the false impression that the child came at the cost of the father’s life. But that’s not what happened to this couple. They went missing together after praying to you. If you’re responsible, I assume you’d have some memory of it.”

The doll shook its head like a rattle-drum. “Xiao-gege, kind cultivator, big beauty, you’ve seen it for yourself—I’m just a lust spirit. I only like taking control of bodies in order to… Heh heh.”

Gu Mang said nothing.

“I don’t snatch people.”

“I didn’t say you did,” Gu Mang pointed out. “How would you abduct two whole human beings? I’m just asking if you ever treated any couple differently.”

The doll pondered for a while, but still replied with a firm, “No.”

The ghost had no reason to lie, so Gu Mang nodded. “All right. Of the temple-goers who’ve prayed to you, do you remember a couple named Bai Rouxia and Lin Yun?”

“That’s the couple that went missing?”

“Correct.”

The little doll paced back and forth on the windowsill, stroking its rough, sawdust-powdered chin. “Bai Rouxia doesn’t ring a bell, but Lin Yun… This name is familiar, like I’ve seen it somewhere. And…”

“And?”

“And not just once.”

Gu Mang’s handsome brows drew together slightly, and he sank into thought, muttering under his breath.

The little doll had a strong instinct for self-preservation. In the interest of keeping its souls from getting torn to pieces, it suddenly turned cooperative. It thought hard for a long time, clutching its small head. If a doll could flush, it probably would have turned red from the effort. But after a time, it sighed and shook its head. “Ah, I can’t remember. But I don’t think Lin Yun is a name I’ve seen on the wishing plaques.”

“I thought not,” Gu Mang said dryly. “Otherwise you wouldn’t feel as if you’d seen it many times. Fine, take your time thinking about this one. Second question.”

“Wah, I’m being so good, so willing to turn over a new leaf and improve as a person. Xiao-gege, you have to speak up on my behalf. You mustn’t send me to the eighteenth or the first floor.”

This ghoul’s true face was shockingly hideous, and he’d disgraced Mo-shidi in every possible way the previous night—yet the little doll certainly was a convincing actor, Gu Mang thought. Its talent at feigning innocence might be unsurpassed by any other ghost he’d met.

On the sill, the doll was still grumbling. “Listen, my hands are tied too. If I said I was lying to you guys earlier, that I never even touched a single woman while I was alive, would you believe it?”

Gu Mang thought of the cucumber ghost’s julienned slices. He started to shake his head, but after a moment, he said, “Answer my second question first. After I hear your answer, I might believe you.”

He looked down at the little doll and asked gravely, “Who moved your corpse beneath that ancient peach tree?”

Chapter Twelve

THE LITTLE DOLL started, hopping to its feet. “Huh? Xianzhang, you’re so good at this! How did you know someone moved my corpse?”

“Isn’t that a stupid question? Ancient trees are known to suppress spirits—the peach tree you’re buried under is at least a thousand years old. It’s been prayed to all this time, and it’s grown strong and virtuous. If you’d been buried beneath that tree from the start, it would have eased your resentment, no matter how strong it was when you died. There’s no way you’d have become as malevolent as you are now.”

“You’re right! You’re so right!” The little doll grew emotional, a light seeming to flare in its mismatched wooden eyes. “Someone did move me there!”

“Tell me the details.”

This seemed to be just the right question; the little doll nodded enthusiastically, but seemed not to know where to start. It plopped down on the sill, then jumped back up, then paced a few circles before it committed to speaking. “Fucking hell, who cares if it’s embarrassing, I’ll just tell you! But…can we take this somewhere private?”

Gu Mang went down to ask the innkeeper for a room, then put the cucumber lecher-turned-doll on the table. “Go ahead.”

Straining with the effort, the doll picked up one of the teacups from the tray and flipped it over before crawling on top. After sitting down properly, it heaved a gusty sigh, its wooden eyes downcast. It sat in silence for a long spell; just as Gu Mang thought the little criminal would go back on its word, it exhaled wearily and opened its mouth. “To be honest, I used to be a poor wretch in Xingxiang City nearby. In life, I only liked three things: gambling, drinking, and women.”

“Didn’t you just say you never touched a woman while alive?”

“Let me finish.” The doll waved its hands for quiet. “I never had any luck. My parents died when I was little, and I hadn’t a lick of spiritual

energy. I could only ever be a commoner, but that didn't matter. Everyone has their own fate, right? I worked at the docks as a boatman, spending the money as quickly as I earned it on drink and gambling with my bros. I did *want* to sleep with women, but the brothel girls looked down on me, so I didn't bother. Hmph, buying an erotic booklet or two was enough. Girls in pictures are the best—their smiles are so sweet, and they never turn their nose up at you.

"But that's no kind of life, is it? The money I got from working myself to the bone with my brothers year-round wasn't enough to buy a single cultivator's robe worn by those noble lords." The doll snickered. "Doesn't that fucking piss you off? That was when I started getting real peeved at the sight of those phony cultivators—though of course, I don't mean you, by the way, xiao-gege kind cultivator big beauty." Despite its overflowing resentment, it still remembered to make a disclaimer. "Don't throw me into the eighteenth floor of the demon-suppressing tower. Not the first one either."

Gu Mang was sitting by the table with his arms crossed. "Lose the 'big beauty' part and I'll think about it."

"All right, xiao-gege kind cultivator big—oh, no big beauty."

"Keep talking."

"Right. Back then, some of my bros saw how down I was. They told me it was because the noble lords were highborn, that this was all the work of heavenly fate, and that I should be satisfied with what I have. Bullshit—who the fuck would be satisfied with one cornmeal bun a day? You're a man and so am I; you cultivate and I do my work—I work even harder than you do, so why am I considered lower than you? Why the fuck do you live like a prince while I live like a fucking dog?"

Gu Mang's lashes fluttered, but he didn't reply.

"One day, one of my bros ran to tell the foreman his ma was sick—the old lady was on her deathbed. He heard the spiritual medicine stall had life-saving pills, so he begged the foreman to lend him some money. Not only did the foreman refuse, he mocked him on top of it. Asked him what right a toad like him had to ginseng root, told him he couldn't afford that

fancy spiritual medicine even with a lifetime's worth of dockworker's wages. If he lent him money, he said, how would my friend repay it?"

"Was the foreman a little lordling as well?"

"Oh, nowhere close. He was neither a noble nor a cultivator. He just had a little better luck than the rest, a regular ol' commoner who earned more stinking cash than us. Because he had a bit of money, he'd spend all day rubbing elbows with cultivators. He was the same as us, the motherfucker, but he looked down on us dockworkers even more than the cultivators did."

As the doll spoke, it raised a finger to pick its nose. Upon realizing that it had no nostrils, it scratched awkwardly at its little wooden face.

"Well I got really hot under the collar about it. That friend of mine was a crybaby; he couldn't do shit other than cry, but I wasn't gonna stand for it, heh, so I broke into the foreman's house a couple days later and filled a whole burlap sack with anything that looked valuable, hauled it away and split it with the bros. We ate and drank whatever we wanted. Though we still didn't have the balls to sleep with women, just in case they discovered how we made our money.

"After that, I didn't bother with the docks—I decided to become a cutpurse instead. It's nothing to brag about, but I had a grand ol' time, spending what I stole on food and drink while giving the extra to orphanages, buying those poor little kids some candy. I was damned good at it—they called me the Gold-Plucking Bandit. People in the city suspected me, but they couldn't fucking catch me. Heh heh, I pissed those fuckers right off," the doll boasted.

"What happened after that?"

The look of satisfaction on the doll's face froze, then faded. "After that? After that, I got nabbed by one of you cultivators. The cultivator was just like you lot—he'd enrolled in the academy and come to the city for his first trial, which was to catch the Gold-Plucking Bandit."

The doll snorted. "After that little cultivator caught me, he hauled me in front of the authorities and even had the gall to ask them for leniency, the hypocrite. That government asshole did him a favor and went easy with the

sentencing—he only had me caned eighty times before letting me go free. Heh, what a fucking joke. Who needed his crocodile tears? Pure-blooded nobles are the worst. I sure as shit didn't ask for his pity."

"So you didn't die by that youth's hand."

"Of course not." The doll paused, then suddenly grew furious. "It would've been better if I had—much fucking better than what happened. After they exposed me as the Gold-Plucking Bandit, I couldn't keep stealing, and no other place would hire me. Eventually, an old lady at a brothel took me in as a laborer. Three years went by. And then one day, a whole troop of soldiers showed up at the brothel and kidnapped me without a word."

"Why'd they kidnap you?"

"Who knows? Those assholes kept me locked up the whole way and threw me into jail. A few days later, a new guy showed up. He was obviously noble, dressed more extravagantly than anyone I'd ever seen. He took one look at me and asked the jailer standing next to him, will it work?

"The jailer said, yes it will, this person has a criminal record and is an infamous thief. No one'll believe him no matter what he says. The noble asked, should we just cut out his tongue?

"As soon as I heard that, I lost it; I jumped up to curse him out without thought. But that noble just listened and smiled. He said, this truly is a lunatic who can't talk straight; leave his tongue. He'll do for a scapegoat."

"Scapegoat for what?"

The little doll looked as if it wanted very badly to roll its eyes, but gave up sulkily after realizing this surpassed the limits of its wooden form. "I only found out the day I died. A whole crowd was interrogating me, ignoring whatever I said and accusing me of spending my days drinking and gambling and whoring, and of having a vendetta against the nobles. They said I drugged one of them as they were passing through Xingxiang City and made him betray his wife and commit vulgar acts with a prostitute at a brothel.

“That noble was sobbing and wailing to his wife. Hah, I’d never even seen that guy in my life, but he had every detail of his story arranged, down to the fact that the type of tea I had drugged was Iron Guanyin. If it weren’t for the fact I’d done no such thing, I might’ve believed it myself!

“That shithead noble’s wife was a fierce lady; I’ve never met a woman so scary. To appease her, her husband demanded I get hacked to death, and said he’d slice my—ahem, *you-know-what* into strips.” At this point, the little doll sank into abstraction, grumbling. “Fuck, even now, I still think these nobles were a little *too* creative.”

Gu Mang’s expression had grown unpleasant. After a pause, he asked, “Then…how did you become a lust demon?”

“I had resentment, didn’t I? At my age, I hadn’t even touched a girl’s hand before I got sliced to ribbons. I didn’t want to give up. Back then, I thought if I could become a vengeful ghost after death, I wouldn’t need to be an old virgin ghost. I could sleep my way through all those women who looked down on me and kill the men who treated me like trash!” The little doll spat sawdust. “I was innocent and they sacrificed me to save their marriage, so I’d destroy their marriage bonds and make them lose their wives and children forever and ever. I’d ruin those despicable hypocrites and show everyone what kind of scum they really are!”

It really is a vicious cycle, Gu Mang thought. He sighed. “Do you remember what that nobleman looked like?”

“’Course! He had two eyes, one nose, and a mouth! He was a man!”

Gu Mang hardly knew how to respond to this. “Anything else?”

“He had a beard, and he was kinda fat.”

Losing patience, Gu Mang outright asked him: “Didn’t he have any unique attributes?”

The doll nodded vigorously. “Yes! There was something you couldn’t miss about him!”

“What was it?”

“He was rich.”

Gu Mang sagged back against his chair. Seeking out this noble so the resentful ghost could let go of his hatred would be impossible. He kneaded wearily at his forehead. “All right, I understand, enough about this. Please tell me what happened after your death.”

“Oh…” the little doll began. “After I died, the energy of my resentment stayed very strong. But those people weren’t stupid—they worried I’d become a ghost and come back for vengeance, so they put a piece of soul-suppressing stone on my corpse and dragged me to the nearest burial grounds and put me in a grave. With that soul-suppressing stone, there was nothing I could do no matter how furious I was. I really wanted to slice that noble’s family jewels to shreds, into even thinner pieces—crosswise slices, like a cucumber accordion. But I was stuck in my body and couldn’t go anywhere, so all I did was count my dick-strips. Do you want to know how many strands of dick I have?”

The doll looked up excitedly but shrank back when it saw Gu Mang’s face. “Okay, I can see you’re not interested, so I’ll just keep talking. Time passed. I increasingly felt like I’d never get a chance at revenge, and I slowly lost hope. I had almost decided to give up. But on the six hundred and twentieth day after my death—”

Gu Mang’s curiosity got the better of him. “You remember it that clearly?”

“Yes, you see, my penis strips number—”

His curiosity was immediately snuffed. “Enough,” he said, holding up a hand.

The little doll looked hurt. “You’re the one who asked.”

“What was the question?” Gu Mang replied grumpily. “Did I ask you about your dick?”

“You asked how I remember it so clearly. It’s because I tied a knot in one strip for every day,” the little doll replied with conviction. “They sliced it into three hundred and sixty-five strips, no more and no less. After I tied a knot in all of them, I knew a year had passed, and when I untied all of them, I knew two years had passed. You asked me! So I answered!”

Gu Mang stared in disbelief.

Man and doll regarded each other in silence. Gu Mang leaned back with his arms crossed and his jaw clenched. “Okay. Fine. Go ahead.”

“On the six hundred and twentieth day, my grave was dug up, and a bright light came shining down. I didn’t get a good look before I was stuffed into a burlap sack, but it was a woman. She lifted the bag and shook it like crazy, mashing my corpse into a pulp before dumping me into a little earthenware jar.

“I was fit to be tied, but at that moment a hand reached in and plucked that soul-suppressing stone from among my bones. I… Ah, even now, I remember that feeling well—it felt so good, like finally taking a piss after holding it for centuries.

“My soul was unsealed. I was still trapped in the jar, but it felt so much better than when the soul-suppressing stone was holding my spirit down. That woman brought my jar to the ancient peach tree and buried me under it. She said she knew all about what happened before I died. She too despised those bloodsucking sons of bitches and wanted nothing more than to see all their offspring die, for them to experience every kind of suffering. She came up with a plan for me—I’d absorb the offerings from beneath the tree and grow stronger, then possess those men. I’d expend their yang energy and defile their whore wives. Heh.”

As it chuckled, the doll suddenly remembered it had already been captured. It wiped the smile from its wooden face and said solemnly, “The end.”

Gu Mang didn’t reply. He’d been thinking as he listened, absently rapping his knuckles on the corner of the table as his eyes flickered with light. After a stretch, he looked up and asked, “Did you ever get a look at your savior’s face?”

The wooden figurine shook its head.

Gu Mang had expected as much, so he wasn’t terribly disappointed. Given the little figurine’s description of its archnemesis—a wealthy man with two eyes and a mouth—Gu Mang doubted it’d be of much use even if the creature had gotten a good look.

“But I remember,” the figurine added, “back in that first year, she came to where I was buried every day and recited an incantation in order to strengthen my resentment.”

Gu Mang looked up. “What incantation?”

“Life lower than dust, liver hard as stone. My limbs simmer in hateful blood, my heart boils with vengeance unowned…”

Listening intently, Gu Mang rapped the table in cadence. “Upon my return, I’ll make a feast of your bones.”

“Huh? How did you know?”

Gu Mang’s expression had grown ugly. “This is no spell of Chonghua. It’s a demonblood curse from the Liao Kingdom.”

“The Liao Kingdom?” The wooden figurine was astonished. “Ain’t that our enemy, the biggest threat to Chonghua?”

Gu Mang rose and shoved the doll into his qiankun pouch. The figurine shouted, “Hey, where are you going? Hello!”

He moved quickly through the village, reaching the ancient peach tree in minutes. It was still early, and no one was praying there. He spread his slender fingers upon the ground and murmured a spell. After a moment, his eyes snapped open, and he walked to the southwest side of the ancient tree. He looked at the dirt there and put a hand out, fingers crooking into a claw as he shouted, “Rise!”

The mud and gravel at his feet began to tremble, and an earthenware jar bound in chains broke through the soil and soared into the air. With a gesture from Gu Mang, the jar came to a stop in midair, hovering beneath his palm.

The wooden figurine poked its head out of Gu Mang’s qiankun pouch and goggled. “Hey! I messed with that little shidi of yours, but I’m working hard to pay for my sins! Dage, why’d you have to dig up my urn?”

Gu Mang brought the jar, clanking with chains, to eye level. Links forged of a dark metal encircled an earthenware jar etched with a winding motif of septimal stars. A talisman paper, still smudged with bloodstains,

was stuck to its surface, upon which the word *Transmogrify* was written in lesser seal script.

“It really is a demonblood curse from the Liao Kingdom…” Gu Mang murmured. He looked down at the doll. “Do you remember anything else about the spellcaster?”

“The spellcaster…” The wooden figurine grimaced. “I really don’t. Their voice was distorted on purpose, I couldn’t even tell their age and barely their gender, but…”

“But what?”

“But I remember she stuttered a lot when she first came to recite the incantation. She even said it wrong sometimes. I don’t think she was very experienced. Also, there was a nasty smell on her hands.”

“Can you track that smell?” Gu Mang asked at once.

“I’m not sure. I can try…but not now.” The figurine scratched its wooden head. “I can’t do anything in the daytime, especially trapped in this doll.” It craned its neck and peered at the little jar holding its ashes, then blew out a resentful sigh before continuing. “It’s gotta be nighttime.”

Chapter Thirteen

BY THE TIME Gu Mang returned, Mo Xi had awoken: Gu Mang found him leaning against the side of the bed, resting with his eyes closed. He didn't open them when he heard Gu Mang come in. "Where'd you go?" he asked flatly.

"Me? Nowhere at all." Gu Mang flashed that infuriatingly shameless smile, but those pretty eyes were lowered in guilt, flicking from side to side as he sought an excuse. "I got bored, so I went out to wander and look at pretty girls."

Mo Xi made no response. Those long lashes lifted, exposing his icy stare. His eyes seemed very sharp, as if they could easily cut through any deception.

Gu Mang's guilt deepened. Blinking those black eyes, he gentled his tone. "Um, I left some spells on this room—I didn't just abandon you here."

"Who cares about that," Mo Xi said. "Where's the ghost you captured?"

"What do you want with it?"

"Interrogation."

"Um…didn't we agree to do that after you recovered?" Feeling the wooden figurine fidgeting restlessly inside his qiankun pouch, Gu Mang smiled at Mo Xi again and said, "Why don't we wait until tomorrow? I just examined it—its vital spirit hasn't reformed. I don't think it could answer any of your questions." Before Mo Xi could express any doubts, Gu Mang snickered. "Oh yeah, do you want anything to eat? I'll go downstairs to fetch something for you. How's fish congee sound?"

"No, thank you."

"Great, then minced meat congee it is—be good and lie down; I'll be back real quick." Gu Mang rattled off the words without taking a single breath, then slipped out of the room and closed the door with a decisive *thud*.

Mo Xi stared at the closed door. After only a moment, it opened again, and Gu Mang stepped back into the room. “Where’s your money pouch?”

Brow furrowed, Mo Xi replied, “On the tea-table. Why?”

Gu Mang strolled over. As promised, Young Master Mo’s money pouch had been carelessly tossed onto the tea-table beside the vase. Gu Mang darted his hand inside like a practiced pickpurse and shoveled a fistful of cowrie shells into his own pocket.

“What are you doing?”

“Buying your congee. Why? Was *I* supposed to pay for it?” After making this righteous proclamation, Gu Mang swaggered off.

As he descended the stairs, the wooden figurine stuck its head out curiously. “Why didn’t you tell him what we discovered? He seems pretty intimidating. If you want to investigate, I’m sure he’d be helpful.”

Gu Mang stuck out a finger and squashed the doll back down. “He’s intimidating for sure. I counted his wounds when I was cleaning them. Do you know how many times he slashed his own hand to keep himself lucid?”

The little figurine shook its head.

“Twenty-seven times. He ruined his whole palm and even stabbed himself three or four times in the thigh, all the way to the bone.”

The wooden figurine, unhappily stuffed in the qiankun pouch, wiggled its little head out once more. “That Young Master Mo is so tough,” it simpered.

Gu Mang narrowed his eyes at it in displeasure. “And whose fault was it that he had to be tough?”

The little figurine ducked its head.

Gu Mang strutted down the stairs. “I can’t let him take part in the rest of the assignment. His suffering was my fault in the first place. His trial is over—now it’s just you and me. Tonight, we’ll put this whole thing to bed. Got it?”

The wooden figurine's muffled voice came from inside the qiankun pouch. "Mmf, got it."

But after Gu Mang procured the congee and began his trek back upstairs, the wooden doll couldn't resist making one more comment. "Little cultivator sir, just so you know, that lordling up there really isn't as noble as you think."

"What do you mean?" Gu Mang asked carelessly.

"I said, that young master in the room up there is no different from that noble who killed me—they're both beasts in human clothing," the figurine muttered. "I saw his true nature. He's probably repressing himself most of the time, or maybe no one's ever made him lose control. Trust me, he's not how he seems at all. I tried to subdue him yesterday, but he's way too stubborn—that's the only reason I failed. That noble young master has a side to him that isn't noble at all. He just doesn't want to accept it."

Gu Mang recalled Mo Xi's handsome face under the crimson canopies as he'd pinned Gu Mang beneath him. Those cool features had seemed unusually malicious as he battled his own impulses, and those eyes had been suffused with scarlet danger. In Gu Mang's memories, those eyes flew open, gazing down at him with a barely controlled desperation, like a falcon's ruthless stare. A surge of intense cold shot through Gu Mang. Only after a lengthy pause did he clench his jaw and smack the qiankun pouch. "Shut up."

The wooden figurine howled miserably and said no more.

The congee was made with fine rice. Since it was Mo Xi's money, Gu Mang had magnanimously slipped the inn's plump lady chef a few more cowrie shells and coaxed her to be more generous with the toppings. The bowl he handed Mo Xi was filled to the brim with thick and fragrant congee. The minced meat was fine and plentiful, the rice soft and tender. White sesame, gently fried crumbs of scorched rice, and fresh green curls of spring onion were sprinkled on top, while a sliced boiled egg, its golden yolk still runny, lay nestled within. It was quite an impressive dish. Though the ingredients weren't expensive and the cook's handiwork couldn't

compare to that of Mo Manor's great chefs, Gu Mang felt reasonably pleased with himself when he took a sniff.

But this young master wasn't so easily placated. He adamantly refused to be spoon-fed, and thus he slowly scooped the congee into his mouth, his bandaged hand clumsy. It was a difficult process, and a humiliating one. Mo Xi silently put down the spoon after just a few mouthfuls.

"You're done?"

"Yes."

"Aren't you being a little too…wasteful?"

"How so?" Mo Xi asked with a frown.

The little wooden doll grew incensed when it heard this, likely reminded of those days it had starved while the rich let their feasts go to waste. Inside the qiankun pouch, it stamped its tiny feet in fury.

It was at this point that Gu Mang realized this little lord before him was someone who didn't know a thing about the daily necessities of life. Explaining the cost of rice would be a waste of time; the best he could do was try placating him. "You'll heal slower if you go hungry. Take another bite at least."

But Mo Xi's face was pale and drawn; he refused to touch the spoon again. Gu Mang was at his wits' end staring at that bowl of congee. Dumping it out was not an option—with the amount of meat in it, doing so would break his heart. He took back the congee and left the room, then found a corner to crouch in. Bowl in hand, he began to furtively slurp the congee down himself.

The little wooden figurine, who had crawled out of the qiankun pouch for a look, was flabbergasted. "What are you doing?"

Gu Mang didn't look up. "Eating."

"But that noble lord already ate from it!"

Gu Mang didn't care. "You just said he's a noble lord, didn't you? Anyway, his table manners are very sophisticated; he didn't stick his spoon

everywhere. Look, he only took two bites along the edge, it's fine."

"But those are table scraps!"

"Have you never eaten table scraps?"

"But you're a cultivator…" The wooden figurine was bewildered. "You cultivators should…should…"

In one bite, Gu Mang ate the soft-boiled egg Mo Xi hadn't deigned to touch. "Should what?" he mumbled through a mouthful of yolk.

The wooden figurine said haltingly, "Be noble and beautifully aloof…"

Gu Mang shoveled in the congee with lightning-quick movements, his mouth so full his cheeks bulged. He regarded the wooden figurine as he would a fool and proclaimed, "Then it looks like you have a severe misunderstanding about cultivators. Not everyone who attends Chonghua's academy is noble." Having said his piece, he bent his head and reapplied himself to the bowl like the human incarnation of a starved ghost.

The wooden doll had been enlightened. Tottering on its stiff legs, it crawled up to Gu Mang's shoulder and poked his bulging cheek with a tiny hand, unsatisfied. "If you're hungry, why didn't you buy yourself another bowl?"

"No money."

The little wooden figure nearly toppled off his shoulder. "Aren't all of you rich as hell? Treating human lives as disposable, doing whatever you want without consequence, enjoying feasts fit for a king and an embarrassment of…something or other!"

"I'll take that as a blessing, thanks," Gu Mang replied, indifferent. "I also hope to enjoy an embarrassment of riches."

At this point, the door at the end of the corridor creaked open. The wooden figurine dove back into the qiankun pouch as Gu Mang jumped, hastily shoving the bowl behind him and licking grains of rice from the corners of his mouth. Wide-eyed, he stared at the youth standing in the hazy golden light of dusk.

“Why are you squatting out here?” asked Mo Xi.

Gu Mang swallowed his mouthful of congee. “I was thinking,” he said with perfect composure.

“You need to squat for that?”

“Ha ha ha.” Even to his own ears, Gu Mang’s laughter sounded forced. “Personal preference.”

Mo Xi looked him up and down, yet made no further comment on this inexplicable preference of his. “There’s something I want to discuss with you.”

“All right, I’ll come in a moment.” After all, there was still some congee left.

But Gu Mang had a liar’s tongue. He’d said *a moment*, but Mo Xi sat with his eyes closed by the table for untold minutes before the rascal sauntered his way in, still licking furtively at his lips. “What’s up, Shidi?”

In the dim light, Mo Xi’s face seemed paler still. His lips were bloodless, his cheeks almost translucent, like frozen jade. His former awkwardness in front of Gu Mang had been set aside; this young man seemed to have outstanding skill in mental compartmentalization. His expression now was cool and calm, devoid of any turbulence, as if that little brother who’d kissed Gu Mang and done such beastly things to his shixiong was someone with whom he’d never crossed paths. Only those pale, bandage-wrapped fingers, unconsciously gripping the corner of the table, exposed the frustration he felt.

“Shidi?” Gu Mang called again.

“Once is enough.” Mo Xi opened his eyes, shooting him a glance from beneath thick lashes. “Sit.”

Though Mo Xi was younger than Gu Mang, he had a commanding aura. Gu Mang perched on the edge of the round stool across from Mo Xi, looking at him curiously.

“I went to Miss Su’s house to return the umbrella while you were out,” said Mo Xi.

“Oh… What happened? This village is all twists and turns. Did you remember the way?”

“I didn’t, so I looked for the innkeeper and asked him for directions to the seamstress’s house. Instead of telling me, he asked me why I wanted to go there.”

“I bet the innkeeper has a son who likes Miss Su,” quipped Gu Mang. “When he saw someone so handsome ask after her, he thought you were going to poach his son’s girl.”

“Stop laughing,” Mo Xi said. “I told the innkeeper I’d borrowed an umbrella from Miss Su, and I wanted to return it.”

“So did he tell you where to go?”

“He did.”

“Then…you went on your own?”

Mo Xi shook his head. “I didn’t return the umbrella.”

Gu Mang blinked in surprise. “Why not?” he asked, curious. “Were you afraid she’d curse you out if you told her you’d gone to the temple?”

Mo Xi lowered his lashes. Only after a long moment did he look up again. “The innkeeper said the seamstress Miss Su passed away not long ago. That day we sheltered from the rain…was the seventh day after her death.”

Chapter Fourteen

THE ROOM was terrifyingly quiet. After a long pause, Gu Mang asked slowly, “You’re saying…that Miss Su passed away before we met her?”

Mo Xi inclined his head. “It was a suicide.”

Gu Mang was silent for a moment. “Did he say why?”

“The innkeeper said an accident befell her family. Her parents passed in close succession; he thought she probably took her own life out of heartbreak,” said Mo Xi. “That family also had a son, but he got married a long time ago. Later, his relationship with the family deteriorated. He didn’t even come back to the village after his parents fell sick.”

“So Miss Su had an older brother…”

“They weren’t related by blood. Their parents hadn’t been in the best of health these past few years, and Miss Su looked after them alone the whole time. They had no other relatives. After Miss Su died, there was no one left. It fell to the next-door neighbors to deal with her corpse.”

Gu Mang lowered his lashes, seemingly at a loss. “But that day, the house looked like a normal family dwelling, not a place of mourning where someone had just passed.”

“I know,” said Mo Xi. “Suicide is inauspicious, so the neighbors buried her without the rites. And no one wanted to tidy the items in the house—those damasks and brocades ordered by the wives of government officials are still piled up in there. After the clients heard the seamstress died while working on them, they were worried about bad luck. No one wants them anymore.”

This might’ve been the most Mo Xi had said to him at one time since the day they’d met, but Gu Mang was in no mood to tease. The furrow in his brow grew deeper and deeper as he shook his head. “We both saw her that night. I didn’t notice anything odd about her. What about you? Did you find anything suspicious?”

“No.”

“Then it’s really too strange. If she was a ghost, even if neither of us used any spells, could we have failed to notice entirely? I don’t think we’re that incompetent.”

“I’ve thought of a few possibilities,” said Mo Xi.

“Let’s hear them.”

“First—the person we saw that night wasn’t the real Miss Su, but someone pretending to be her.”

“How about the second?”

“Second—Miss Su didn’t actually die. For one reason or another, she made it look like she committed suicide, knowing no one would come tidy up after she died, and continued to hide in her house.”

“And the third?”

“Third—Miss Su really did die, and no one else entered the house. What we saw that night was indeed her ghost, but using some magic we don’t yet understand, she hid her supernatural energy extremely well, such that without careful examination, we would find her no different from a living person.”

Nodding, Gu Mang asked, “Is there a fourth?”

“No,” Mo Xi said. “But I have something else to tell you.”

Gu Mang sighed. “Damn. You’ve managed to make so much progress even on bedrest, you poor injured thing. Go ahead, what else have you got?”

“It’s about the missing couple Qianling Elder ordered us to investigate, Lin Yun and Bai Rouxia.” Mo Xi paused, his expression turning grave. “That Lin Yun…is Miss Su’s elder brother.”

“What?” Gu Mang’s mouth fell open in shock. “Lin Yun and Miss Su are siblings? But—why is one of them surnamed Lin and the other Su?”

“The innkeeper explained it,” Mo Xi replied. “The embroidery house we stayed at was called Lin’s Sewing. It was run by a couple named Lin for many years, and Lin Yun was their only son. Su Qiao was the daughter of a

family they were friends with.” He paused. “Do you remember how Su Qiao said there’s lots of diseased miasma in this village, and people often fall ill and die?”

Gu Mang nodded again. “I do.”

“Su Qiao’s birth parents died this way when she was four or five. The Lin couple couldn’t stand to see her orphaned, so they took her in. You could accurately say Su Qiao was Lin Yun’s adopted sister.” Mo Xi closed his eyes before continuing. “The Lin couple’s disappearance and Miss Su’s suicide both occurred this month. I don’t think this can be coincidence.”

“Neither do I,” mumbled Gu Mang.

Mo Xi looked up. “One more thing. I don’t think it’s true that you went out earlier just to wander around.”

“That’s right, neither do—” Gu Mang mindlessly agreed before registering Mo Xi’s words. He froze, black lashes quivering as he shot Mo Xi a hesitant look.

Mo Xi’s arms were crossed, as were his long legs. He pinned Gu Mang with an imperious stare. “Get out that ghost puppet hidden in your qiankun pouch.”

Gu Mang’s expression shifted several times, flashing like a festival lantern. Finally, he put on a shamelessly mischievous smile, although his feet were anxiously grinding into the ground. Feigning obliviousness, he asked, “What?”

“The ghost puppet, the one that contains the resentful spirit buried beneath the ancient peach tree. You don’t need to hide it anymore. I knew you were lying to me as soon as I woke up.”

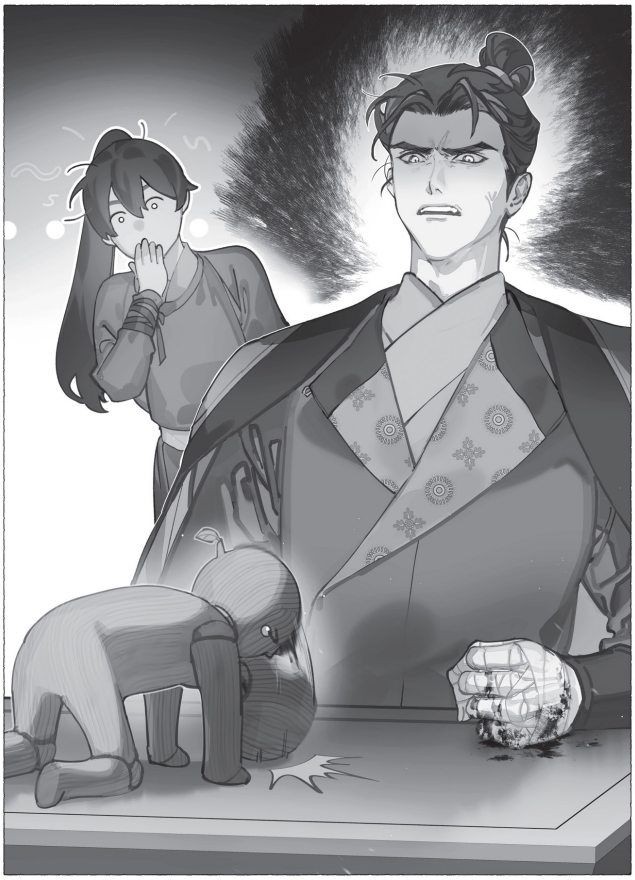
There was nothing Gu Mang could say in his own defense. He smiled helplessly. “Shidi, look at you! Those keen eyes of yours can see through anything, aha, ah ha ha.”

Mo Xi’s reply was icy. “It possessed me for such a long while last night. Did you really think I couldn’t sense it?”

Gu Mang had no choice but to reach for his qiankun pouch and empty its contents onto the table. A pile of talismans and weapons came

clattering out alongside a mountain of milk candies and barley taffy wrappers, but there was no sign of the wooden figurine. Gu Mang sighed, grabbing the corners of the pouch and shaking it. “There’s no point in hiding. Hurry on out and offer up your head in apology to Young Master Mo.”

At last the wooden figurine let go of the pouch and fell out, its wooden limbs clacking against the table. It lay listlessly on the tabletop for a beat, then spun onto its knees and started slamming its wooden head into the table, the *thunk thunk thunk* loud enough to rattle the sky. “Young Master, spare me! I don’t want to go to the first or the eighteenth floor of the demon-suppressing tower! Any other floors, we can discuss! Young Master, you’re young and fresh, heroic and powerful, prim and proper—”



“Stop it,” said Mo Xi.

But how could the wooden figurine stop? Holding fast to the principle of “if a thousand isn’t enough then ten thousand might suffice; if I slam my head till the world ends I might keep my sad little life,” it banged its head harder against the table, the noise so loud it woke the guests in the next room over. Their disgruntled neighbors threw something at the wall, which made contact with an audible bang. “Shameless lovebirds, can’t you go at it a little more quietly? Your bed’s rocking so loud! Aren’t you scared it’ll collapse?”

Both Gu Mang and the figurine were rendered mute.

Black qi wreathed Mo Xi’s face. He slammed his hand wrapped like a zongzi on the table, and the wooden figurine collapsed in a trembling heap. It shot a glance at Mo Xi’s injured hand, watching blood seep through the snowy gauze, then at Mo Xi’s dark expression, his eyes as menacing as a blade tempered in flame.

Mo Xi clenched his jaw. “Are you incapable of understanding human speech?”

“I’m not, I’m not, Young Master! I’m sorry!”

Mo Xi didn’t want to waste a breath more on it, so he looked up at Gu Mang. “What did you get this thing to confess to?”

“Nothing much…” His eyes met Mo Xi’s. Gu Mang hesitated for a moment, then sighed. “Okay, never mind. Here’s the deal. I was going to hide this from you and go alone with this doll to investigate what happened to Lin Yun and his wife.”

Mo Xi’s gaze was sharp as a dagger, danger flickering in those dark eyes. “Why?”

Gu Mang blinked. “Do you even have to ask? It’s my fault you got so badly hurt. Wouldn’t I be a monster if I made you run around while I sat back and did nothing?”

Mo Xi stared at him in silence. After a turn or more, the tension seemed to bleed out from his muscles and he turned away, his tone

marginally less frosty. “My injuries have nothing to do with you. It was my own carelessness.”

His profile was sharp and cold, still obstinate, his features somehow evoking the crisp chill of fallen snow. As Gu Mang looked at him, he sighed inwardly—this young man had an iron will. Mo Xi had already started the investigation on his own; if Gu Mang went to check out the embroidery shop without him, he’d end up insulting this Young Master Mo.

“Ah, all right, I miscalculated. I’ll tell you everything. Don’t look at me like that anymore, it scares the hell out of me.”

He recounted the entirety of the day’s earlier events to Mo Xi in detail. When he was done, he turned to the little wooden figurine. “Where did you see Lin Yun’s name? Do you still not remember?”

The wooden figurine shook its head, dejected, but assured them, “I’m trying hard to remember right now!”

“You’d better think a little faster,” Mo Xi said frostily. Even though the doll was merely a piece of wood, it shivered.

“Shidi, I was planning to pay the embroidery shop a visit after dark tonight. You should come with me, but this time, no acting rashly—can you promise me that?”

“I can.”

“Then let’s pinky swear,” he said, extending a hand.

Mo Xi shot him a frigid look. Gu Mang aborted the gesture, discreetly using the hand to scratch at his face instead. The corners of his lips quirked up as he began to chuckle. Just as he was about to speak again, the little figurine yelped, “Ah! Heavens above!”

Two pairs of black eyes turned to him—Gu Mang’s gentle and bright, Mo Xi’s cold and icy. Caught between two such extremes, the wooden figurine choked a little, then carefully said, “Um… Xianzhang. I remembered where I saw Lin Yun’s name.”

The strange trio trudged to a hill that served as a mass burial ground. A handful of villages around buried their dead here. It was dotted with the haphazard graves of nameless travelers who'd died far from home, criminals given the death penalty, and lonely beggars with no ancestral tombs.

"After I died, the people of Xingxiang City tossed me out here and buried me in a hole they dug for me." The little wooden figurine scrambled along the mountain path as it spoke. "Later, my bones were moved to the ancient peach tree, but I returned here to wander around when I had the time. The yin energy here is really strong, very comforting."

"Where is Lin Yun's grave?" asked Mo Xi.

"We're almost there, just a little farther. His gravestone appeared about a month ago. People don't often make the trek here to visit the graves, and new gravestones are rare as well. Even a little wooden plaque like this one is unusual. I went to go look at it a bunch of times, and even sat on it to bask in the moonlight all night," the wooden figurine babbled. "Fuck, I don't know how I managed to forget about it."

Before long, they came to a gnarled date tree. The soil nearby had been freshly disturbed, and a crooked gravestone erected in front of the pile of dirt. Four simple words were upon it: *Here lies Lin Yun.*

Gu Mang and Mo Xi exchanged a glance. Mo Xi bent and pressed his hand to the grave, closing his eyes in concentration.

"Anything?" Gu Mang asked as he rose.

Mo Xi shook his head. "No signs of transmogrification. I can't sense his soul at all."

Generally, any ghosts cultivators could sense or summon were resentful spirits, or else the souls of the freshly deceased. Other ghostly souls would float toward the netherworld after their seventh day, en route to reincarnation. If Mo Xi couldn't sense him, Lin Yun's soul had probably already passed on.

Gu Mang thought a moment, then suggested, "How about this—why don't I try?"

At the confusion in Mo Xi's eyes, Gu Mang went on, "Even though souls disappear after their seventh day, the corpse retains remnants of the deceased's memories. In Yanbie Hall we have a technique for manifesting this kind of afterimage." He paused. "But it depends on the person. If, in life, the deceased carefully guarded their secrets, we won't be able to read them. But if Lin Yun had some things he didn't mind other people knowing about when he was alive…"

Gu Mang's gaze landed on that bare wooden plaque. He sat down by the grave. "I'll try it and see," he said. "But I'm not that good with this technique; I haven't mastered it yet. If you pull me out of it midway, my memories might get scrambled. So unless I open my eyes on my own, don't wake me up."

Mo Xi agreed, and so Gu Mang formed the sigil with both hands and settled down cross-legged, slowly closing his eyes. "Abandoned lies the body, meaningless is the past. I knock on the door of this freshly dug grave and sit for the tale of the dead one's days. I ask to hear your thoughts, and I wish to see your memories. If the bones beneath the Springs have any regrets, don't let the grass grow untended above your grave."

As the final syllable drifted from his mouth, a light breeze stirred on the slope, as if countless whispering voices rose up from the soil and surged toward Gu Mang. The glow of blue spiritual flames enveloped Gu Mang; after a moment, the flames sank into his skin and vanished.

Gu Mang's vision filled with light as his surroundings gradually brightened.

He stood within Lin Yun's remaining memories. It was dusk. A seven- or eight-year-old boy was sobbing as he ran back to the embroidery shop. He was covered in mud, like an underfed monkey that had been rolling in a flooded rice paddy.

"Dad! Mom! Wah!"

The woman at the loom stood up at his cry, and the man busy inside also poked his head out. As soon as she saw the boy's pathetic state, the woman laughed and berated him, "You useless little brat. Did you pick a fight with Su Qiao again?"

“I didn’t fight her! I just wanted her to go with me to the city to watch monkeys doing tricks. But she wouldn’t listen to me. She even said, she said…” The boy sniffled, then burst into fresh tears. “She said making monkeys do tricks wasn’t as fun as tricking me! She kicked me into the rice paddy and threw rocks at me!”

Recalling Mo Xi’s tale from the innkeeper, Gu Mang thought to himself: *This boy is probably Lin Yun, and these two would be Lin Yun’s parents.*

The father laughed out loud. “You’re older than her, and a boy to boot, but every day you get chased around and beat up, then come home crying! Even I’m embarrassed for you.” He mimed wiping tears off his own cheeks.

The mother turned to glare at her husband. “Enough, can you stop with that talk? Come here, Yun-er, come with Mom to wash off in the back garden. Look at you, filthy all over. Su Qiao’s to blame too—that little girl’s as wild as a mountain bandit. Once her mom gets better, I’ll give her a piece of my mind. How can you raise a girl like that? Who’ll marry her in the future?”

Still smiling, the father shot a glance at Lin Yun. “It’s fine as long as she’s pretty. Don’t you agree, Son?”

Lin Yun choked, sneezing out a muddy bubble of snot. Gu Mang saw that his neck had flushed red under the mud.

Mother and son walked to the back garden, hand in hand. As if it’d only just occurred to him, the father yelled after them, “Hey, wifey, has our sis gotten any better?”

“No, she was still lying in bed when I went to see her yesterday. If she was better, would Su Qiao be running amok like a mountain monkey? In a while I’ll butcher a chicken and stew it—why don’t you bring it to their house to help them recover? Su Qiao’s dad’s been run off his feet recently; he’s always coughing when he talks. If both of them get sick, it’ll be tough.”

The father laughed happily. “Sure enough, the missus’s got a sharp tongue but a kind heart. Fine, let me know when it’s ready. I’ll bring it to

them.” After a pause, he called out to his son. “Hey, Yun-er, why don’t *you* bring it to Su Qiao’s house?”

“I…” Lin Yun’s face was so hot it was practically shining through the mud. He said hesitantly, “Fine, whatever. It’s not like I’m scared of her.”

He followed his mother to the back garden and disappeared behind the door frame.

Their surroundings darkened, then lit back up. When Gu Mang could see again, he found he was no longer in the embroidery shop but on the outskirts of Lotus Village. It seemed not much time had passed; Lin Yun and his family were still dressed in summer clothes as they stood with their faces upturned beneath the searing sun.

This was a funeral. Or rather—two funerals.

A girl younger than Lin Yun knelt, clad in the hemp robes of mourning: Su Qiao. The robes dwarfed her small frame, enveloping her like cloth sacks as she wailed before the burial mounds, her skinny shoulders shaking.

The villagers who’d come to help sighed and murmured. One of the madams wiped her tears, eyes filled with sympathy as she shook her head. “Poor dear. She’s just a child herself; now that her parents are both gone, how will she get by?”

“Ah, what could they have done? Falling sick with that kind of disease… Thank goodness the girl was still young and didn’t help butchering that pig. Otherwise she would’ve been infected by the sick animal’s blood as well. Then all three of them would be gone.”

“That little girl’s fate is too hard…”

Within the crowd, Lin Yun looked up and pulled quietly on his mother’s sleeve. “Mom.”

His mother patted him on the head and tore her tearful gaze away from the little girl. She wiped at her eyes, then looked down and asked, “What is it, Yun-er?”

“Why don’t we bring Qiao-mei home with us?” he asked earnestly. “Otherwise, where else can she go?”

“Um…”

“You and Papa were talking about it last night, I heard you. Mama, even though we’re not rich, if we leave Qiao-mei alone in her old house with the rooms all empty and her mom and dad gone, wouldn’t it be too sad?” Seeing his mother’s hesitation, Lin Yun pressed, “She can come live with us, can’t she? She’s clever and good with her hands; she can help you. If…if you’re worried there won’t be enough food, I—I can eat a little less.”

His mother looked down at him through eyes glistening with tears. Lin Yun was close to begging. “You really don’t have to spend too much effort taking care of her. I can do it myself…”

His voice faded, and the light dimmed again.

But the wheels in Gu Mang’s mind were turning. How strange. If the innkeeper was to be believed, Lin Yun had cut ties with his parents after he married. He’d sounded like a callous and unfilial son. But from what Gu Mang had seen, not only was Lin Yun not callous, he was exceptionally kind. He seemed to like his Su Qiao-meimei very much, even if Su Qiao didn’t care much for him.

What had happened?

Before Gu Mang could think any further on it, the light around him began to swirl once more. This time, the scene didn’t immediately solidify; all he could see were some faint and flickering images.

Chapter Fifteen

“I SAID, I don’t want to go check out the temple fair, I want Mom to teach me the plain weave.” The girl’s voice was soft but unmistakably obstinate. “You can go ahead without me.”

“What’s the point of going without you?” Lin Yun muttered. “Come on—I’ll buy you a sugar painting.”

“I don’t want one. *Hmph*, who wants to misbehave all day like you? Dad’s already spent a month teaching you to prepare indigo dye, but you still can’t do it on your own.” She pulled a face. “La la la, piggy brain.”

The scene changed once again. Gu Mang was looking at a dike covered in willows, bustling with people as a performance took place. Golden fireworks exploded raucously in the night sky, glittering motes spilling down like a brocade goldfish flicking its tail. Su Qiao and Lin Yun, slightly older now, were sitting on a bridge, watching the fireworks in the sky and their reflection on the lake as dragonflies dipped low around them.

Su Qiao sat on the edge of the bridge, embroidered slippers swinging on her dangling feet. Her petal-soft lips were telling Lin Yun a joke, but she fell short of breath halfway through every sentence. She told her joke like this:

“Heh heh, let me tell you, ha, once upon a time there was a man, he—*pfft*, ha ha ha…and then b-because, ah ha ha ha, you know! And then he ah ha ha ha oh heavens, it’s so funny, I’m going to cry ha ha ha!” She wiped at her beautiful eyes. “Hey, how come you’re not laughing?”

Lin Yun played along and put on a smile. Satisfied, Su Qiao rubbed Lin Yun’s head and said, “That’s more like it. Let me tell you another one, this one’s even funnier ah ha ha—”

Their simple companionship flowed like running water. Before Gu Mang’s eyes, the young man and the maiden grew older each time they appeared, like scenes in a shadow-puppet play. Bit by bit, Gu Mang understood. In Lin Yun’s memories, he’d always loved Su Qiao, since

childhood and all the way to his coming of age. But Su Qiao had never returned his feelings. She'd joked with him, drunk with him, and shared her deepest secrets with him. She treated him as her closest companion on earth. But she never seemed to view him with anything more than familial affection.

"Qiao-mei, let's take a walk. It's such a nice day out. Don't work so hard—it'll be bad for your health if you wear yourself out."

But Su Qiao always said, "Ah, not today, I'm just too busy."

"Why are you always working so much? It's not like we'll starve."

She moved the shuttle and dipped her head to smile. "I guess I've been poor for too long."

She really had been. She neither had the foundation for cultivation, nor any wealth from her family. She could scrape by while she was healthy, but if she encountered any disease or disaster, someone like her would have no choice but to sit and await death with her hands tied.

It wasn't as if panaceas didn't exist in this world. Within the healer's hall of Shennong Terrace in the capital, there stood neat rows of spiritual medicines that could cure all manner of diseases, immortal herbs that could lengthen lives, all at prices no ordinary civilian could ever hope to afford. With each generation, the people in this village died in droves before their time. It was a barren, sickly place, where the simple accomplishment of surviving to the age of forty was worth burning incense in thanks at your ancestors' graves. Su Qiao understood this too well. She was haunted by an inexplicable urgency when she heard the cries of children sobbing helplessly as their parents passed. She found it harder and harder to put down the shuttle in her hand, as if the thin thread could save her life and all she could have and hold. For this reason, she willingly dipped her head at the rich young masters and smiled at the pretty mistresses.

"How about some new clothes? Our handiwork is excellent!"

She sought customers diligently, burying herself in her work at the loom as if she didn't know the meaning of weariness. Her embroidered shoes were the most beautiful of all, and popular with her customers. She found herself repeating the same sequence of movements all year long:

kneeling before the customer, bending down, her fine hands cupping those precious feet as she patiently took their measurements.

She was unluckier than Lin Yun, more precocious than Lin Yun, and stronger than Lin Yun, but she worried much, much more than Lin Yun. As the days wore on, she became increasingly stubborn, increasingly anxious. The last scene in this cascade of memories showed Su Qiao arguing with Lin Yun. “When will you get some sense in your head?!” she cried.

“What about you? When will you realize that I…” The young man’s lips quivered, those gentle eyes reddening. “I…”

“You what? All you do is play all day. What now? You can’t even speak properly to me?”

Lin Yun looked as if he’d choked on a cold, stale steamed bun. The red was no longer confined to his eyes but spreading across his entire face. He flushed scarlet as he glared at her, furious and heartbroken. But he was still too weak. All of that anguish amounted to nothing more than him swallowing hard. “Okay,” he said at last, clumsy and embarrassed. “I’m sorry. I was wrong, I’ve wasted your time.”

The scene crumbled as Gu Mang watched. They’d had the same argument too many times; her furious shouts seemed to weave together like a boulder smashing into the sea, shattering those beautiful memories. That foam melted away, and darkness rose.

When the vision became clear again, Su Qiao’s silhouette had disappeared. Lin Yun appeared alone in Chonghua’s capital. He had a ratty cloth sack on his back and viewed the endless stream of carriages before him in panic. After standing blankly in place for a long time, he stepped into the throng on wobbly legs.

“Shopkeeper, are you hiring?”

“Boss, do you need another hand?”

He spun like a top, painstakingly mustering the courage to enter each of those majestic shops of the capital looking for work. Every time he was berated and kicked out, his anxious stuttering became more pronounced.

By the time he stuck his head in and looked around at the third dessert shop, Gu Mang could see his steps were unsteady. It happened that the servant manning the shop had no brain attached to his eyes and mistook him for a customer. “Flower cakes for sale, flower cakes, eight treasures with red bean paste, sesame, peanuts, almonds—everything’s there that ought to be. What can I get the young master?”

Lin Yun waved his hands frantically. “I’m not a young master…”

At his serious and clumsy response, a few customers shot him sidelong glances between making their picks, finding it funny. The servant, still grinning, changed his sales pitch. “Oh, then—young lord, what would you like? The fresh-steamed flower cakes are some of our best. Why not have some?”

Lin Yun grew even more fretful. He wanted to say, *I’m not a young lord, I’m not buying flower cakes*. But his tongue tangled, and what came out of his mouth was, “I’m not a flower cake, I’m not buying young lords.” He realized his mistake as soon as it was out, and the base of his neck instantly flushed.

A maiden in a pink coat and a pleated skirt of almond yellow stood among the customers buying cakes. Hearing this, she burst into laughter, those beautiful eyes gazing at him with interest.

Lin Yun glanced at this maiden in alarm, hopelessly flustered. He muttered, almost whispering, “I just came to ask if the boss needs another hand…”

As soon as the servant heard this man was here to compete for his earnings, his expression changed. “Get out! You can’t tell the difference between a lord and a cake but you want to take my damn job? If you’re not buying, out with you!”

Lin Yun, shoulders hunched, hadn’t walked far before he heard the soft tinkling of a jade pendant from behind. A crisp woman’s voice called out to him.

“Hey you—wait a minute.”

Lin Yun turned. Upon seeing that it was the girl who'd burst into laughter inside the shop, he lowered his head and replied obediently, "Hello, miss."

The girl smiled. "You're new to the capital, aren't you? Are you looking for work?"

"Yes, miss."

"Where'd you come from?"

"Lotus Village."

"Aiyo, that's a bad place." The girl pressed her lips together. "You came to earn some money?"

This time, Lin Yun didn't immediately reply. After a long silence, he said with difficulty and embarrassment, "I…" He bit his lip and braced himself, his voice low, as if speaking to himself as much as the girl. "I came to the capital t-to make something of myself."

When he finished, his earlobes seemed to glow red. He hung his head and waited for the girl to mock him. But he heard no words of ridicule even after a long while. He cautiously glanced back up and found her looking at him with amusement and mild curiosity.

"Are you good with numbers? If you are, my family's shop happens to be opening a new location. I'll be managing that one, and I need someone to work on the accounts. You look like an honest man to me, and you're pretty interesting." She batted her lashes. "Will you come?"

At this point, Gu Mang could piece together the rest. This girl must be the daughter of that wealthy merchant family in the capital, the Bai Clan —in which case, this was Lin Yun's future wife, Bai Rouxia.

Yet this, too, was outside Gu Mang's expectations. Although the Bai Clan wasn't of noble blood, they were powerful businessmen. They sourced treasures from all over the country for various cultivators, and in exchange, those cultivators sold them materials for magical implements at the lowest prices. As their success grew, the Bai Clan had opened locations in cities all over Chonghua and become well-known among Chonghua's commoners as well.

Gu Mang had always been of the impression that the Bai Clan was cold-blooded. A magical tool that could dispel sickness should've cost a hundred cowries, but they insisted on selling it for more than five hundred. Those who could afford it would use it, and those who couldn't would die. In any event, there were no other shops that sold such tools to commoners. The Yue Clan and Medicine Master Jiang's manor only offered their wares to nobles. Gu Mang had assumed Bai Rouxia was some kind of greedy shrew; he'd even guessed that the reason Lin Yun cut ties with his parents after marrying high into the Bai Clan might've been because of this woman. He had puzzled over why the daughter of the Bai Clan would lower herself to marry a penniless nobody.

But as he watched, it gradually began to make sense. A poor, clumsy boy and the curious daughter of a rich family—as it was said, opposites attract.

The scene shifted again, showing Gu Mang the days in which Bai Rouxia and Lin Yun went from getting to know each other to spending their time together, and from spending their time together to sharing their hearts with each other. Bai Rouxia was clever, kind, and loved to have fun. She was nothing like Su Qiao; all the scenes with her were cast in a warm golden light and accompanied by her carefree and joyful laughter.

Meanwhile, in Lin Yun's memories, that stubborn and flinty embroiderer rarely ever rested or showed tenderness. It wasn't that Su Qiao wasn't kind—she would often use her silver from sewing to buy great piles of flatbread from street stalls and go door-to-door to distribute them to orphaned children. But Su Qiao saw the hardships of life too clearly. Or perhaps she had no choice but to see them clearly because she'd always been struggling against this kind of miserable suffering, to the point that she couldn't rest at all. Her silhouette seemed to be stitched into the loom; her eyes shone with flames. If one looked at her from a distance, there seemed to be words carved deep into the lines of her face: *I refuse to succumb, I will surpass you all.*

They were both beautiful flowers, but one was girdled with rows of thorns, while the other bloomed gently. Lin Yun had cupped that thorny flower for so long in hopes that it would blossom for him, but it remained a

tightly rolled bud that never once unfurled its petals. Eventually, he could hold it no more.

Everything settled like falling dust. Lin Yun and Bai Rouxia were married. The night before the grand wedding, within the old house in Lotus Village, the fumbling Lin Yun was checking over those wedding gifts that, though sincerely given, seemed almost laughable to the Bai Clan. Of course, his engagement to Bai Rouxia hadn't been smooth sailing. Bai Rouxia's parents had passed, and the current family patriarch was her elder brother. Her brother had expressed in the most extreme terms his scorn for his little sister's insistence on marrying this poor, stupid youth whose only good trait was his face. After his attempts at foiling them failed, he had furiously said, "Sister, you must be blind."

"You're the one who's blind! He's such a cute dummy!" Bai Rouxia shot huffily back at her elder brother. "I have to watch you hatching your little schemes all day, currying favor with Medicine Master Jiang and the Yue Clan. It's maddening! I like the simple and honest type."

The elder Bai brother had replied icily, "If you love simple-minded creatures so much, why don't you marry a pig?"

Despite his protestations, he at last acquiesced to the wedding between his little sister and this penniless wretch. Still, he didn't leave off mocking his future brother-in-law: "I've always been curious—how thick must your skin be, that you're shameless enough to take a woman of my Bai Clan for a wife? Other than your delicate little face, is there anything about you worthy of mention?"

Lin Yun thought Bai-gongzi was being protective of his sister, so he stuttered back, red-faced, "D-Dage, m-my heart is sincere…"

The eldest brother Bai looked back at him in disgust. "Wow. What an asset you'll be." Even till the day of his wedding, Lin Yun never understood that he was being scorned for his poverty.

His parents were delighted, but they couldn't help but worry. "They disdained the betrothal gift earlier; though you're going to live with them, you're still the one taking her as a wife. Do you think these gifts might be too little…?" His mother sighed. "It still feels like a dream. The Bai Clan

might not be noble, but they're unimaginably lofty to us commoners… How did their daughter take a fancy to *you*?"

"Mom…"

"Yun-er, do you think they might want to take your head and sell you off?"

Just as he was about to mumble another awkward reply, the patter of footsteps sounded on the stairs. Gu Mang looked up, along with the rest of the family, to see Su Qiao descending with a box in her arms. Perhaps because it was too dim, or perhaps because Lin Yun's emotions were so complex he hadn't dared engrave Su Qiao's face in his memory, Gu Mang couldn't see what expression she wore until she stepped out of the shadow.

Su Qiao was smiling.

She smiled with that same boldness she had in the past, but now, there seemed to be a rare gentleness in it. Her face glowed pink in the candlelight, heightening the beautiful delicacy of her features.

"Look at you! Didn't I tell you off for being lazy in the past? How embarrassing; you don't even have a decent gift for the bride at your own wedding." She berated him with a smile and pressed the beechwood box she held into his arms. "Take it! Let me put some feathers in your cap, you dumb block of wood."

He opened the box. Inside lay a splendid wedding gown, embroidered with gold and silver thread. Colorful butterflies danced across the fabric, spangled with beads and crushed jade. It was made from the finest Sichuan brocade, the silk soft as flowing water.

"What do you think? Isn't it pretty?"

Lin Yun stared dumbly. It took him a long beat to form any words. "This…is really expensive…"

"Yup, I know it's expensive—I cleared out years of savings to afford it." Su Qiao nodded, as if to say *don't mention it*. "We can't have you disgracing yourself."

The Lin parents finally came back to their senses.

“Qiao-er…”

“How could you? How much extra work did you take on to make this dress?”

Su Qiao waved an impatient hand. “Aiya, that’s enough, it doesn’t matter.” She slapped Lin Yun on the chest as she grinned. “Our little Lin-zi’s[7] going to be a young master of the Bai Clan. Why should I worry about the paltry price of some fabric? Hey, you’d better remember all the good I’ve done you, and then get Young Mistress Bai to remember it too.” She grew happier as she talked, glowing with delight. “We’ve made it! In the future we can enjoy the shade of a great old tree, ha ha!”

Lin Yun gazed at her silently, then looked back at the clothes in the box. Who knew how much time it’d taken to place each exquisite stitch? “Qiao-mei…”

“If you’re going to thank me like an outsider, save it.” Su Qiao put a hand over his mouth, then swatted Lin Yun in the head. “Dear Brother, let me beat you a little one last time. Once you become part of the Bai Clan, I won’t be able to bully you anymore.” Her eyes glistened beneath the lanterns, the shattered light within her irises almost too bright. “Really… I’ve bullied you since we were children. I won’t be able to get used to it so fast, hah.”

She withdrew her hand from Lin Yun’s face. Lin Yun mumbled, “You can still beat me whenever you like. If you stopped, I probably wouldn’t know what to do either.”

Su Qiao’s smile froze, the light in her eyes shuddering violently. The Lin parents exchanged a glance and made an excuse to leave. Only the two erstwhile childhood sweethearts remained in the little embroidery shop.

“Look what you’re saying.” Su Qiao forced another laugh. “C’mere, let me instruct you. Listen up. In the future, only your wife can beat you; you can’t let other girls do it. Got it?”

Lin Yun sincerely had no idea what was going on, but he nodded anyway. After a moment, he gazed at her again. “Qiao-mei, after I marry, bring Mom and Dad to the capital often. Come whenever you like and stay however long you’d like. We’ll be happy to have you.”

He still spoke in that clumsy, almost brainless manner of his, artlessly extending his invitation. But the *I* in his sentences had become *we*. And the one included in this *we* was no longer Su Qiao, but a different girl entirely.

“As long as it makes you happy,” he said.

Su Qiao smiled and looked down, rubbing her fingers together behind her back. Gu Mang noticed her fingertips were raw—she must have rushed to finish the bridal robe.

Lin Yun was still earnestly promising, “As long as you…”

Su Qiao had been listening in silence, but at this moment, her emotions suddenly surged up. She looked up, a strange light wavering in her eyes. Her voice was unsteady. “Then, what if I—”

Her eye caught on the bridal robe in his hands. That light in her eyes froze, then dimmed. She lost the courage to continue.

“What if you what?” Lin Yun asked in confusion.

Su Qiao fell quiet, then shook her head. “Nothing.” She changed the subject with a smile. “Right, back to business. In the future, when I go to the Bai Clan’s shop in the capital to buy tools, can you give me a discount?”

“Of course.”

“That’s perfect. Now that there’s someone like you in Lotus Village, our days of suffering are over.” Su Qiao beamed. “People won’t have to die because they got infected with demonic qi and can’t dispel it…”

“Mn.”

“I’ll take care of your parents. To me, they’re no different from my own birth parents; don’t you worry a bit. If there’s nothing urgent, don’t come running back here all the time. Spend your time with Young Mistress Bai.” Su Qiao paused. “Girls like having company.”

Her eyes seemed to go distant when she said these words, but she quickly collected herself and dipped her head to rub again at her hands. “That’s all. You should get ready and go to bed early. I have things to take care of too—I have to help carry the congratulatory gifts tomorrow. You know I’ve been strong since I was little.”

Lin Yun regarded her in silence, then said, “Qiao-mei, there’ll be someone to accompany you in the future.”

Su Qiao stared. “Me? Forget it—given my personality, ah ha ha. It won’t do. And I’m so busy. I don’t browse the markets, I don’t know how to tell jokes, I’m too harsh, and I only think about money.” Su Qiao ascended the stairs as she spoke. “I…” Her voice faltered. She paused for a moment, then her steps suddenly quickened, as if she were trying to flee up the stairs. “I’m busy… I’m too busy…”

I only have these two hands, but I have to embroider the dawn and dusk, the sun and moon, the ten thousand leagues of the nation.

But look—this is worth it. Not all people and lives are the same. What I have is too little; I have to struggle so hard just for this small bit. Only then can I say “I can help you” when you need it. Only like this can I take care of myself, and take care of Mom and Dad. Only like this can I earn some money to spend on the bride marrying a little dummy like you, and work my fingers bloody sewing a lavish new robe to bring a smile to her face.

Chapter Sixteen

THE FRAGMENTS of memory reshuffled again, flickering through events from after Lin Yun and Bai Rouxia were married.

“Xia-mei, there’s a lot of malevolent qi at Lotus Village, and the people there get sick often. Do you think we could sell sickness-dispelling implements to the villagers at a slightly reduced price?” Lin Yun cautiously asked Bai Rouxia, who was now dressed as a newlywed woman. “If you’re willing, I’ll discuss it with Dage…”

“Why’re you discussing it with him? He’ll never agree.”

“Then… Um…”

“I have the final word on trifles like this. Go ahead and lower the price—doing good accumulates virtue; there’s nothing wrong with that.”

Lin Yun’s eyes went wide. “Th-thank, thank you!”

The light dimmed. The scene whirled around once more, but the next time he could see, Gu Mang found that the silhouettes and voices had become indistinct, like ink that had spread on damp paper. He had to concentrate to discern any words.

Gu Mang shivered. This could only mean one thing. This section of memory had been excised after Lin Yun had died—he was the second one to see it. Whoever had taken this piece of memory was probably…

He had a hunch, but he didn’t follow it right away. Hazy recollections were still stuttering along before his eyes. Straining, Gu Mang could just barely discern the voice of the big brother of the Bai Clan, talking to Lin Yun. His brother-in-law’s voice was naturally low, yet now it was so deep and slow as to be terrifying.

“What the *hell*…” His voice was distorted, as if coming through water. “Who do you think you are? How dare you tamper with prices? This is absurd! Attendants, come—give him a beating!”

A woman’s voice rose in fury—Bai Rouxia. “What are you doing?! I was the one who gave permission to lower the price. What’s wrong with that? Our family’s rich and our lives are easy now—have you forgotten we used to be poor? We’re no noble clan. Have you forgotten how Papa and Mama used to suffer? What’s wrong with wanting to do a little good? If you think you’ve lost money, I’ll pay you back in full!”

Her almond-yellow silhouette threw itself toward Lin Yun. “Are you revolting against your mistress? He’s my *husband*; you’re not to lay a hand on him!”

“Master Shopkeeper…” The family servants looked at each other, then gazed hesitantly at the elder brother Bai. “Um…”

The brother waved his hand and barked, “Beat him.”

“Ge! Is your heart made of stone?”

“Mistress—”

“You’re not allowed to beat him! Dage! What ill do you think will befall you if you wring a little less money from commoners? In order to ingratiate yourself with the Yue Clan, you copy Yue Juntian’s every move and praise everything he does! Do you not have any of your own thoughts left in your head?!”

In contrast to her shouts that grew more and more furious, her elder brother’s voice became colder and colder. “Bai Rouxia. You need to get one thing straight—I am the head of this family, not you. You look down on me for licking Yue Juntian’s boots, but what do *you* know? Getting anything done in Chonghua requires the favor of the nobles. If we insult the Yue Clan by tampering with our prices, that’ll be the end of the line for us! The people who can’t afford the medicine will die when their fate runs out,” he proclaimed. “I’m running a shop selling magical implements, not a temple of charity. If you want to live a life of philanthropy with your poor and lowly husband, you can get the hell out of this family.”

“You—!”

“See if I’d stop you!”

In the ensuing scuffle, Gu Mang heard Bai Rouxia scream. The scene before his eyes grew ever blurrier; the family servants, dressed in red, rushed forward. All Gu Mang could see was an expanse of bloody scarlet. Only after some time did he vaguely get the gist of what had happened. In the chaos, Bai Rouxia had accidentally been shoved over and kicked while arguing with her brother. She hadn't known she'd been pregnant. Crimson surged endlessly within the memory, alongside the sound of footsteps, cursing, and cries of pain.

In the end, all that was left was the sound of quiet sobbing.

People were stratified into social hierarchies, and further stratified within those categories. The young mistress of the Bai Clan seemed wealthy in the eyes of the masses. But though their residence was large and sprawling, the Bai Clan had begun as commoners too; their lives weren't as glorious as Su Qiao and the others imagined. Everyone had their own vulnerabilities, and Bai Rouxia had already done her best to lend what help she could to Lotus Village.

When Gu Mang saw her again, she was lying in bed. Her anger and resentment at her brother, her pain and suffering from the loss of her child—all these thoughts and emotions churned within her, worsening her health until she spent her days delirious. She refused to see her brother; only her husband Lin Yun was allowed to stay at her side.

"Young Master, Miss Su's come to the manor. The master shopkeeper's still angry and won't see any visitors; he tried to send her away. But Miss Su refuses to leave. I came to ask for your help."

Lin Yun was holding his wife's hand, his chapped lips parting as he asked blankly, "Is there something wrong with Qiao-mei?"

"She needs two doses of guyue herb, but Medicine Master Jiang's manor doesn't sell those herbs to commoners. She knows we have some, so she wants—"

But as soon as Lin Yun heard the words *guyue herb*, he started laughing through his tears, harsh and self-mocking. "Rouxia and I only sold some of Dage's most common sickness-dispelling implements at a discount and yet he berated us so harshly. Guyue herb is one of the most precious

medicines in Chonghua, and the doses we have on hand cost Dage unimaginable effort to procure from Medicine Master Jiang. Look at us now—do I dare give it to her? How *could* I give it to her?"

The servant hesitated. But when he saw Bai Rouxia, unconscious and swaddled in the bedding, he closed his lips over the rest of his news.

"Tell Qiao-mei to go home," Lin Yun said. "It's not that we don't want to help, it's that there's really…really nothing we can do…"

"Yes." The servant bowed and retreated, closing the door behind him.

At this point, the story Mo Xi had told Gu Mang seemed to echo in his ears.

"The innkeeper said an accident befell her family. Her parents passed in close succession; he thought she probably took her own life out of heartbreak. That family also had a son, but he got married a long time ago. Later, his relationship with the family deteriorated. He didn't even come back to the village after his parents fell sick…"

Ill parents… Guyue herb… Miss Su…

Gu Mang shivered with the force of his realization. He knew what the servant had ultimately failed to say. This must have been when Lin Yun's parents were infected by the miasma, and their lives were in jeopardy. If this was how it happened, many things made sense. Su Qiao had grown resentful after being rebuffed and assumed Lin Yun had forgotten his roots after climbing higher in society. Unable to bear the deaths of her adoptive parents, her soul had been warped by hatred. She concocted a scheme to entice the heartless Lin Yun and his wife—who'd so recently suffered the pain of miscarriage—to Lotus Village to pray for a child, and then murdered the two in revenge.

Yet there were still many holes in this theory. For one, Lin Yun and his wife weren't actually heartless. Sooner or later, they must've learned of the Lin parents' passing. How could they fail to react to the news, much less be in the mood to journey to the village to pray for children? Bai Rouxia had miscarried her child not long after their wedding, and Su Qiao had come at nearly the same time to ask for guyue herb. Without medicine, the old couple should've passed quickly. But according to the innkeeper,

Lin Yun’s parents had only died in recent days. What had happened? Not to mention, if Su Qiao was a mundane seamstress devoid of any spiritual foundation, how had she set up such a supernatural scheme to kill her brother and his wife?

There were too many questions yet unanswered, and several key points missing. He wanted to watch a little longer; as soon as they were uncovered, he could—

The fragments of memory shuddered around him. Gu Mang froze, holding his breath.

The sound of a Qiang flute playing a bleak and resentful melody burrowed its way through from the outside world, shattering the memories into powder. The scenes around him disintegrated. Gu Mang seemed to be falling into an ocean that had been scoured by a torrential rainfall. All warmth and color disappeared, the memories circling in the depths like fish scales in the water, glimmering as they sank.

An invader had broken in.

“Ah! That’s right! It was this flute! The person who dug me out and buried me beneath the peach tree! They played it often at the tree after they finished reciting the incantation! Aiya, I can’t listen to this! Whenever I hear it, I think about how I got framed and murdered. It makes me so mad! I’ll kill them! I’ll *kill them*!”

On the hill in the burial ground, the wooden figurine shrieked as it spun in circles, shouting “kill them” over and over.

“You can’t kill anyone.” Mo Xi spared it not a glance.

The wooden figurine was exploding with vicious energy—it spat out puff after puff of black smoke. “I—bleugh—! What’s—blaugh—happening?”

“That’s spirit-suppressing wood. No matter how deep your resentment, you can only spit smoke if you don’t have sufficient cultivation.” As Mo Xi spoke, he fished the last thundercurse barrier talisman out of his qiankun pouch, then bit the end of the bandage on his

hand and began to unwind the gauze. His wounds hadn't yet healed, and the gauze was stuck to his skin in some spots with blood, but Mo Xi cared not a whit. He tore it off without flinching. "Barrier, activate!"

The talisman sparked between his fingertips and a wall of light came down around Gu Mang. He reached out to the little figurine. "Come here."

The wooden figurine was still vomiting up black qi. "What—*bleurgh*—for?"

"He can't be disturbed by that flute." Mo Xi shot a glance at Gu Mang, who was now frowning. "The thundercurse barrier won't hold out for long. We need to think of something."

"Why are you taking me with you?!"

"You think I'd leave you alone with him?"

That haunting melody was undoubtedly produced by their adversary, who had realized what they were up to and was playing from wherever they'd hidden themselves. Their magic was capable of influencing living and dead minds, and it was spreading through the burial grounds.

The wooden figurine perched on Mo Xi's shoulder. It vomited more black qi as its little limbs began to shudder. A few sparks jumped from the wood. "No, no… This flute… This flute music…it will…"

It will call to mind your most hated memories.

This was no ordinary musical weapon; the notes it played did not merely attack or heal. This was a demonic flute. It had only one source yet seemed to come from all directions, making it impossible to locate the flute player by ear.

"I can't take it anymore!" The figurine sobbed hysterically. No tears could fall from its wooden face, yet it shrieked itself hoarse, sunk deep into the hatred the ghost had felt before death. "Why did you have to kill me?! Why was I your victim?! What did your marriage have to do with *me*?! Don't touch me! I hate… I *hate*…!"

Mo Xi's willpower was indomitable. He could still endure it, but as that Qiang flute music grew bleaker, events from the past began to surface in his mind's eye, filling his heart with flames of rage.

His father’s death in battle. Mo Xianting’s usurpation of his father’s place. That half-open bedroom door, Mo Xianting’s malevolent expression, his mother’s dark hair spilling across the table.

He fell to one knee, catching himself in a pile of dead leaves and branches with his wounded palm. Forming a heart-calming sigil, he temporarily suppressed the hatred roaring in his chest. “This isn’t a spell from Chonghua…” He slowly closed his eyes. “This is a soul-stealing technique from the Liao Kingdom.”

As the fourth in a line of illustrious generals, Mo Xi had a loathing of their enemy nation’s dark magic carved into the marrow of his bones. He gritted his teeth. “How could there be Liao Kingdom demonic cultivators in Lotus Village?!”

“I don’t know, I don’t know! I want to tear you all apart! I want to destroy all your laughing, lying faces!” The little wooden figurine’s voice grew sharper and shriller. “I want all of you dead… I fuckin’ refuse! *I refuse!”*

The burial grounds spun before his eyes. Mo Xi tried to summon the Huashe whip again and again, but only a few red-gold sparks flickered at the tips of his fingers before the trial vambrace restricted his spiritual energy. He could hear the faint voice Qianling Elder had sealed within the trial hoop: *During a weapon trial, summoning a high-level weapon from any clan is prohibited.*

Mo Xi swore under his breath. The demonic cultivators of the Liao Kingdom had successfully infiltrated Chonghua’s Lotus Village, yet all the weapons he had to hand were ordinary iron implements and a few beginner-level spiritual talismans!

The notes of the Qiang flute seemed to weep as they wrapped around the hill. The counterpoint of resentful sobbing grew thicker and thicker, such that it felt like a chain of shapeless shackles had fastened itself around Mo Xi’s neck and sunk into his body. He seemed to hear a familiar, sorrowful war song beneath the whispering of the foliage, snaking its way up from the abandoned graves—

Days grow shorter with the coming of winter, moonlight spills like the sun over Kuizhou snow at night. Fifth-bell dawn breaks bleak with the drumbeats of war, the starry river flickers across the Three Gorges…[8]

Mo Xi's vision fuzzed and blurred. In a daze, he saw a slender silhouette step forward amid the sounds of the flute music. His silver armor flashed, and his countenance was grave.

"Xi-er…"

"Papa?"

The man's face was indistinct in the fog. He slowly stepped closer, reaching a hand out to Mo Xi as ink-dark smoke billowed behind him. "Give me your hand. Let's go together."

The sound of the Qiang flute twined around them, so clear it seemed the flute player was right at their side.

Mo Xi closed his eyes. *No*. His father had died in battle long ago. This was fake, an illusion born of the demonic flute. He didn't take that hand; instead, he stepped back. Each stride took all his willpower, every movement drifting between reality and confusion.

In the illusion, the man's face sharpened and grew sinister, eyes lengthening into slits yet maintaining a vestige of familiarity. "Xi-er, why aren't you coming? Why aren't you—"

The Qiang flute melody quickened as the man's face distorted, becoming that of a vengeful ghost as he charged at Mo Xi. His voice drilled into Mo Xi's eardrums like an awl of ice. "—*listening to me anymore*?!"

Darkness engulfed Mo Xi, coldness soaking him like freezing water.

"Why aren't you listening to me? Xi-er, don't you feel hatred? After how they treated you—don't you want revenge?! Mo Xianting defiled your mother, he disgraced you…" Each syllable was like something out of a nightmare. "He disgraced you… Take revenge on him… Hate him… I'll teach you…"

A crisp note cut through the haze, as if a blindingly bright fireball had exploded and shattered the darkness. The fog of the illusion retreated like fleeing horses and vanished into the darkness.

Deee! Dee deleee!

The music that had broken the demonic curse was still playing brightly. Mo Xi panted, rising from the ground. Even the little wooden figurine gradually stopped sobbing and swearing. Sitting on Mo Xi's shoulder, it stared blankly as it slowly returned to its senses.

"This is…" After listening a few moments, Mo Xi's expression changed subtly. "A suona…"

He was right. This was a piece played on a suona. The grieving sound of the Qiang flute collapsed before the suona's brash notes. This new piece was like a tyrannical rogue charging across the hill with abandon, drowning out all other noise.

At first, the flute player still struggled to continue, but it was futile. They managed two notes before the suona shattered them with its sharp notes, while the rest of the tune was snatched by the melody and thrown out beyond the sea. The flute had been playing a mournful battle song, but as soon as the suona came in, the tune was throttled and transformed into a vulgar little ditty.

"The crouching dragon and the racing horse both buried the same in dry soil. Worldly affairs hold no meaning—"

"Hey little girly, turn and look at me, Gege'll love you till eternity!"

Mo Xi blinked. If not for the desperation of their present circumstances, it would have been funny. He heard the sound of dried leaves and branches crunching behind him and turned.

Beneath the glow of the late-afternoon sun walked Gu Mang, who'd woken up of his own accord at some point. He held a simple, long-stemmed suona, the white ribbon tied to its end fluttering in the breeze.

The impertinent notes of the suona made the whole hilltop vibrate. Gu Mang's youthful brows quirked in an expression of disdain. He stopped with one hand on his hip and one foot propped on some unlucky ghost's grave, sounding the suona again and again in the desolate graveyard filled with dead and dying trees.

"I'll go with you into that draping bed-canopy—"

The sound pierced the skies. Mo Xi watched Gu Mang, who noticed his shidi's gaze. Gu-shixiong blinked those pretty eyes. The tawny sun illuminated his handsome face, gilding his features with indolent golden light.

"Don't let down a loving man—!"

Chapter Seventeen

"ARE YOU all right?" Mo Xi asked when the demonic music was fully dispelled.

Gu Mang smiled and caught his breath, the lips that had been wrapped around the mouthpiece shiny and red. Mo Xi's gaze snagged on that mouth. He quickly looked away.

"How could I not be?" Gu Mang asked. "Trying to show off in front of *me*, and that's all she's got?" He wiped his mouth, his sturdy chest rising and falling as he caught his breath. "If she'd held on a little longer, I would've made her spit blood."

Mo Xi looked pointedly at the suona dangling from Gu Mang's hand, the white gauze ribbon fluttering.

"My holy weapon," Gu Mang explained.

"I saw you duel. On the training field," Mo Xi added.

"Oh." Gu Mang remembered the incident and smiled. "That doesn't count as a duel. I was just helping out my bro."

"You used a scimitar back then."

"That thing? I bought it from a weapons shop. It's not the holy weapon the academy got on my behalf," Gu Mang said, grimacing as he waved his suona. "This is my real holy weapon. I don't use it often; every time I play, the other music cultivators in the academy say they can't practice anymore. They get so mad at me, I…"

He paused and sighed. "Usually, I go to the backwoods to practice. I generally don't use it unless I really have to."

Mo Xi nodded. The complaints from the other music cultivators made sense, he thought. One only needed to consider the fate of that unfortunate Qiang flute player.

He watched Gu Mang disperse the suona into motes of spiritual light that sank into his palm. "That flute player is a demonic cultivator from the

Liao Kingdom," Mo Xi said. "We need to report this to the Bureau of Military Affairs."

"Aiya, no need for that." Gu Mang patted him on the shoulder. "You're still too green. You hear a little demonic flute music and think it's someone from the Liao Kingdom. Think again." Gu Mang's gaze darkened. "If it were a Liao Kingdom flute player, they'd be much stronger. A novice cultivator who hasn't undergone the necessary training would've lost his mind in the blink of an eye. Of course," he quickly amended, "you might be an exception." He cast a sidelong glance at the bandages Mo Xi had torn off to form the sigil.

"Then who was the flute player?"

"Who else but the seamstress Su Qiao." Gu Mang sighed. "I need to tell you about what I saw in Lin Yun's memories toward the end. No matter what Su Qiao's up to, I think we should head back to the Lin embroidery shop. Young Mistress Bai's corpse, the reason Su Qiao knows Liao Kingdom curses—all of it's probably hidden in there," Gu Mang said. "There's not a minute to waste. I'll talk as we walk."

They arrived at the Lin embroidery shop in hardly any time at all. Gu Mang set down several layers of transparent barriers around the building to isolate it from the houses nearby. Hand on the door, he probed the energy within. "No demons hiding here." He closed his eyes and concentrated. "But the spiritual energy flow in this building is really very strange—some type of energy I can't identify is surging inside."

"The Liao Kingdom's black magic curses," guessed Mo Xi.

"Most likely." Gu Mang nodded, opening his eyes. "There might be some trick waiting within. Let's split up. You go in through the main doors; I'll jump over the wall in the backyard and sneak in. Be careful once you're inside."

The two went their separate ways. Gu Mang ran along the ridge of the roof like a cat, swiftly disappearing behind one of the arched eaves. Mo Xi pushed open the door with a *creak*.

The inside of the embroidery shop was terrifyingly silent. The room was the same as it'd been that rainy night, with piles of brocades in the

corners and veils hanging low from the ceiling beams. All that was missing was the lady of the house who had greeted them and offered them a dry change of clothes.

Mo Xi walked slowly through silk veils like mist and smoke, his hidden weapon compartment ready in his sleeve. A quick examination of the first floor turned up nothing out of the ordinary, yet he had the nagging feeling that something was amiss.

Something was different from the first time they came.

He climbed the stairs to check the second floor. The wood squeaked beneath his feet. The light upstairs was dim, but Mo Xi didn't need to see to notice what was strange about this floor.

It was the scent. The pungent smell of blood drifted out from the gaps in the doorframe ahead of him. He could hear the sound of something dripping.

Mo Xi pressed his porcelain-pale fingers against the door. It hadn't been tightly closed, and swung open with a tiny push. Mo Xi saw the whole room laid out before him: Fresh blood had been used to draw a pentacle upon the floorboards, and a black wolfdog was lying in the middle of the array. Its belly had been carved open, and its heart, liver, spleen, stomach, and lungs removed and placed at the five points of the formation. The sound of dripping he heard was the black dog's blood. This dog looked freshly killed, while dozens of shriveled dog corpses lay piled in the corners of the room. One on the very top had a wound on its leg—the same black dog Gu Mang had caught on that rainy night.

Swallowing his disgust, Mo Xi bent down to study the bloody array drawn on the ground. The writing was twisted and cramped, instantly recognizable as the ancient language of the Liao Kingdom. He could make out a few words, though he couldn't understand it fully.

But there was one thing he could be sure of. That rainy night he and Gu Mang bumped into Su Qiao, she had been using that dog to cast this malevolent magic. She'd been bitten in a moment of carelessness and let the dog run away, which was why she stumbled out in the rain to give chase.

Mo Xi checked all the other rooms in succession but found nothing else out of order. He returned to the first floor, planning to meet up with Gu Mang in the back garden.

Yet as he passed the spot where he and Gu Mang had sat by the brazier that day, he happened to glance toward a corner of the room. It took him a moment to register what was wrong. When he did, he came to a stop.

Gu Mang's words from back then flashed through his mind—

Miss Su is really talented. Her birds and beasts are lifelike enough, but look, these scenes from stories are so beautiful as well. Look at that silhouette on the gauze. Doesn't it look just like a graceful maiden?

That night, as they had sat here by the fire, they'd admired the yellow gauze together. The life-sized silhouette of a beautiful woman had been sewn on the yellow cloth.

At the time, Gu Mang had smiled as he said, *Even though this maiden isn't as detailed as the red-crowned crane on the one next to it, it's still very interesting. I wonder what such a big embroidery piece can be used for.*

Now that embroidery piece was gone.

No—that wasn't right. That bright yellow cloth was still hanging on the beam, but that embroidered figure as tall as a real woman had disappeared without a trace. What they saw that night hadn't been an embroidered portrait at all—it had been a real woman standing behind the yellow gauze.

Mo Xi's face drained of color as he bolted toward the back of the house. "Gu Mang!"

In the back garden, Gu Mang was walking among the dye basins he'd pushed over all across the courtyard. The wooden figurine sat on his shoulder shouting, "Ah, that's right, that's the smell—the lady who moved me beneath the old peach tree and recited curses smelled exactly like this!"

Su Qiao smelling of dye made sense. The dozen or so dye vats were chokingly pungent, and the seamstress spent a great deal of her time working with them. It was no surprise the scent lingered on her, but Gu

Mang wasn’t pacing around to investigate the smell. He prowled through the courtyard, casting left and right.

“What are you looking for?”

“A person.”

“That Miss Su you were talking about?”

“No, someone else.”

Gu Mang flipped over a pile of cloth heaped in a dark corner of the courtyard, but found only withered branches and dried leaves beneath it. He turned to lift and inspect any other items that could hide a person from view. The courtyard was too full of junk, much of it already corroded from age. Rust flaked off whenever he moved something, and dust rose in all directions. But Gu Mang dug through the detritus with only more fervor, as though he cared nothing for the filth.

The last segment of Lin Yun’s memories had been the most crucial piece of the puzzle.

Before Lin Yun’s death, he’d received a letter from Su Qiao. In it, she hadn’t mentioned the deaths of his parents. Her words had been gentle, telling Lin Yun that his parents were fine but missed him dearly, and that they were worried Young Mistress Bai hadn’t yet been blessed with a child in all these years. Su Qiao wrote that his mother and father were getting old, and wanted to hold their grandkids. They hoped the couple would come visit the village.

That big tree behind the temple, the one you liked smacking peaches off when you were little—it’s probably cultivated into a tree immortal over these thousands of years. Praying to it for good fortune and children works like a charm. Why don’t you bring Sister-in-Law back for a visit?

Thus read the letter.

By the time he received this missive, Su Qiao hadn’t contacted Lin Yun and his wife for several years. Lin Yun knew Su Qiao resented him for

sending her from the manor back then. He'd written a letter to explain, but he didn't know if the servants of the Bai Clan had never sent it, or if Su Qiao simply couldn't forgive him. Either way, the two of them hadn't seen each other since that day.

Lin Yun had wanted to travel back home for a long time, but Bai Rouxia had a fragile constitution. She never quite recovered from her miscarriage, and her mood seemed to have permanently soured. A short walk by the lake could make her ill, to say nothing of a long journey to the countryside. Day after day, week after week, he ended up putting off the trip. When he suddenly received Su Qiao's letter, written in such a warm and amiable tone, he finally felt that Qiao-mei wasn't mad anymore. Lin Yun was delighted and went at once to his wife's bedside to tell her the news.

He found Bai Rouxia sitting by the windowsill with a goose-yellow blanket over her shoulders, reading the account books. These accounts contained intimate details of the business, so the elder brother of the Bai Clan usually only allowed his sister to handle them. When she was young, Bai Rouxia hadn't understood what was written in the books as she read them and did whatever her dage said. But now that she was older and had developed her own views, these accounts filled her with disgust. Throughout the booklet were written notes like these:

Malicious sickness spirits have increased in number; there are not enough exorcism bells to meet demand. Raise prices for Huangtian copper and soul-return herb.

Yue Manor will be needing large quantities of snow-beauty shrub for decoration in the coming days. This is the main component of our peace and guardianship pillars. Yue Manor cannot be slighted. Raise prices for peace and guardianship pillars until demand goes down.

Bai Rouxia had a kind nature. After losing her own child, her conscience ached all the more upon seeing those cruel words on the paper. In fact, the principal reason she'd lingered in her sickbed was her inability

to loosen this knot in her heart. She felt the Bai Clan had made many mistakes. They had the blood of commoners, yet they grew rich off their suffering. She saw her miscarriage and long illness as retribution from the heavens.

When Lin Yun showed her Su Qiao's letter, she sighed. "It's good that Qiao-mei doesn't blame us. Let's pay a visit to Lotus Village and see Mom and Dad then. How long has it been since you went? Go pack up the luggage—we don't need much, but remember to take from the storeroom some of the herbs Medicine Master Jiang gave us. The house of mercy in the village surely needs them."

"But there's no way your dage will agree…"

"Just tell him we're going to Lotus Village to pray for a child, and that we're doing some good deeds to earn good karma." Bai Rouxia closed the book of accounts. "Record all the treasures and tools we're taking. We'll pay for them from our own pocket at market price. Even if he's unhappy about it, what can he say?"

Lin Yun agreed, then haltingly thanked Bai Rouxia again.

Before the small window, Bai Rouxia sat with her hair in the elaborate style of a young mistress, yet wore a grave expression. Only when she smiled did a hint of that carefree rich maiden she had once been show on her face. "Why are you thanking me? Look at these jewels and silks I'm wearing—which of them wasn't bought with wealth pilfered from poorer folk?" She sighed softly. "I haven't the status to do anything, nor do I have much talent of my own. I can't change my elder brother's mind, but it makes me so uneasy… Lin-dage, it really hurts me."

Lin Yun, clumsy as ever, didn't know how to console her. All he could say was, "Don't worry, you—you're a good person. Once we go pray at the temple, w-we'll have a child."

Bai Rouxia smiled and shook her head. "That's not what I meant. Anyway, these kinds of things can't be forced. Instead of praying for a child, what I'd really like is to have a chat with Qiao-mei. You're a bit of a boor, dear; you don't understand how exhausting it's been for her."

"I do…"

“You understand just the tiniest bit.” Bai Rouxia pinched her slender, pale fingers together for emphasis. “She and I are both powerless women, but despite being from a poor family, she’s done more good than me. She’s a slip of a thing, but the ambition in her is stronger than my brother will ever possess. Her dream’s just too big. She’s afraid she’ll be mocked, so she never talks about it, that’s all.”

“Qiao-mei has a dream? What is it?”

Bai Rouxia shook her head and didn’t answer. “I didn’t spend much time with her, but I could tell that she’s got lofty aspirations, heavy worries, and a good deal of pride. In truth, any time she asks me for anything, I can sense her embarrassment. She always acts like it doesn’t matter, but she doesn’t dare look at me. She’s afraid I’ll get mad, or find her a bother, or kick her out.”

“So that’s how it is?” Lin Yun murmured.

“Mm-hmm. When you really did kick her out, it must have made all her fears a reality. She doesn’t know me well; she must think I made you harden your heart since you came to the Bai Clan, until you discarded her and your parents like an old shoe. That’s why she’s been angry with you for so long.”

“B-but I wrote her a letter explaining…”

Bai Rouxia smiled bitterly. “Didn’t you grow up with her? Don’t you know how proud she is? Do you think she’d be willing to read any letter you wrote, or see your face, before her anger subsided? But now she’s finally sent us a letter. Give her my thanks for the tip about praying for children at the tree. We’ll choose a date soon and go back to Lotus Village to visit Papa and Mama.”

Thus the matter was settled. They picked a good day to go back to Lotus Village, taking with them several qiankun pouches filled with spiritual medicines.

When Su Qiao greeted them, she pretended as if nothing had happened, smiling as she invited them in. That night, the couple walked into a trap that had been painstakingly prepared for many years. Su Qiao laid out

a feast of good food and fine drink, lying that her parents had gone to the city to buy meat as she coaxed them into drinking a cup of poisoned wine…

Lin Yun's memories stopped there. His last thoughts were of the agony in his stomach, of Bai Rouxia collapsing on the table, and of Su Qiao's face, hazy in the candlelight. Tenderness, hatred, pain, and satisfaction surged across her beautiful face. "Little Lin-zi, Sister-in-Law, what's wrong?" She asked, her voice ghastly yet shaking as she said the words. "Can you hear me?"

Even at the moment of his death, Lin Yun hadn't understood what had happened. In the final segment of his memory, there was confusion, bewilderment, and terror, but no suspicion toward Su Qiao. Stupidly he even tried to warn her: *It's nothing, it's just that this wine seems to have gone bad. It hurts a lot to drink. Qiao-mei, you mustn't drink it—you and Mom and Dad shouldn't be so stingy. Why are you holding onto wine that's gone sour…*

But these words were no more than a bloody gurgle in the back of his throat. Everything came to an end.

"Found it!" After searching fruitlessly for so long with several spirit-sensing tools, Gu Mang let out a shout—the black magic compass in his hand was spinning madly. A beam of red light shot from it toward one of the dye vats in the courtyard. Gu Mang ran over to it and peered inside.

The basin contained some murky, oily liquid, its darkness obscuring the contents within. Gu Mang peered into it, but made out only his own dusty reflection. As he was about to reach for a stick to dredge its contents, he felt an icy hand on his shoulder.

Gu Mang stood motionless. In the reflection, a woman's pale face appeared behind him, gazing down into the vat just like he was. Their eyes met.

It was Bai Rouxia.

Gu Mang felt his blood turn to ice as he recognized the face he'd seen in Lin Yun's memories. He summoned his narrow scimitar as he whirled, slashing at that undead Bai Rouxia. But the woman was quicker than he could've imagined. She opened her mouth and belched a billowing cloud of

black smoke. Gu Mang hastily ducked, holding the blade protectively before his chest. In this position he was well-guarded, unless Bai Rouxia could summon a third hand from behind him—

Wait—*behind him!*

The realization shivered up Gu Mang's spine in an instant, but it was still too late. He heard something burst from the dye vat behind him and felt hands grab him by the neck like two cold and scaly snakes, dragging him back into the basin with a great splash.

As Gu Mang coughed and choked, he saw Bai Rouxia staring coldly down at him. Turning his face, his horror became total—the monster who'd dragged him into the basin for a sensual couple's bath looked identical to the Bai Rouxia before him.

Chapter Eighteen

THE ICY FIGURE behind Gu Mang was choking him relentlessly, soaking his body in dye. The female corpse had terrifying strength; he couldn't breathe or even open his eyes. He struggled to find his footing, hands spasming out to form an array or cast a spell, but the corpse grabbed him around the waist and jumped back into the basin with a splash.

The corpse's grip was like iron; Gu Mang slipped in so quickly he didn't have time to blink before he got an eyeful of dye. Yet to his shock, he felt no sting of pain—rather, he felt the wounds he'd just sustained quickly healing.

What was happening here?!

Images flashed through Gu Mang's mind like lightning: Two faces, poison wine, the Liao Kingdom's black magic, a talisman stuck to an earthen pot. The mass burial grounds, Su Qiao chasing after the black dog in the rain, the Lin couple coming to visit Su Qiao with a cart full of medicines, herbs they never got the chance to gift.

These two women were…

"Gu Mang!"

Mo Xi's voice cut through the chaos. Gu Mang wrenched the scimitar around and stabbed the corpse holding him down as hard as he could. He struggled to the surface, shouting, "Smash the basin! Hurry! Mngh!"

The corpse seemed not to fear pain; after a long hiss, she surged back to the surface and wrapped her fingers around his neck once more. With immeasurable strength, she dragged him back into the vat.

An ignition talisman flared at Mo Xi's fingertips; with a thrust of his hand, the talisman paper crackled into raging flames. He threw it at the Bai Rouxia standing by the vat. "Ignite!"

Bai Rouxia stumbled back from the blast; by then, Mo Xi had already slapped a second talisman on the dye vat. The basin exploded with a thunderous *boom* as liquid sloshed across the ground.

Strangely, the corpse choking Gu Mang seemed to lose her strength as soon as the water spilled. She fell limply to the ground, incapable of speech or movement.

Gu Mang clambered up, panting and brushing dripping hair from his eyes. Around his throat were the purpling marks of five fingers; he'd been choked so hard he couldn't speak. He licked his lips and gave Mo Xi a silent thumbs-up.

Mo Xi came to his side and pulled out the iron sword in his qiankun pouch, ready to deal with any potential danger the corpse posed. Yet a fresh gale suddenly rose—the second Bai Rouxia leapt over, heedless of the blade, shouting sharply, "Don't touch that shell!"

The tip of Mo Xi's sword was pressed to the corpse's throat, its cold light gleaming, yet he didn't stab downward.

Bai Rouxia's face distorted as she cried in fury. "Get out of here! Both of you get lost! You ungrateful bastards! I must've been blind to let you stay the night! If I knew, I would've slaughtered you two then and there! Beasts! *Beasts!*"

Mo Xi stared at her face. "You're…Miss Su?"

She tipped her face to the sky and shrieked a laugh, her voice warping. "What does that have to do with you? Put down your sword! Take your companion and go! If you don't, I've got hundreds and thousands of ways to make sure you die miser—"

"I don't think you do."

"—ably…" Su Qiao stared with bloodshot eyes, slowly turning her head to gaze at Gu Mang.

Gu Mang rubbed at his throat, voice hoarse. "What you learned were merely the barest bones of the Liao Kingdom's black magic. You wanted to kill us on the hill, then returned here after you failed in an attempt to kill us again. You were stymied twice, yet now you want to let us go? Do you really want us to leave, or are you out of ideas?"

Hatred blazed in Su Qiao's eyes, but it was soon replaced with a look of confusion. She panted harshly and didn't reply.

“Miss Su,” Gu Mang asked, “do you regret it?”

This inexplicable question stabbed into Su Qiao, reducing her to trembling. She seemed extremely affected, both cheeks and mouth quivering. Her eyes were fierce with upset, the whites thoroughly scarlet. “Regret…” She laughed again, like the eerie hoot of an owl. “Ha ha ha—*regret*? What nonsense do you spout? What should I be regretting?!”

“You killed them because of a misunderstanding.”

“I didn’t!” She howled in agony, face creased with malevolence, “Why shouldn’t I have killed them?! They should have died! Two bastards! A bastard couple!”

In the abandoned garden, she brandished hands like threatening claws. Perhaps because her uncontrolled emotions affected her magic, her face didn’t look like Bai Rouxia’s anymore. It gradually shifted, becoming something halfway between Bai Rouxia’s likeness and Su Qiao’s original face.

“He took her for a wife but ended up as low as a servant! Every time I went to Bai Manor for medicine, I endured every kind of scorn! Did he ever speak up on my behalf? When Mom and Dad were about to die, I kowtowed before their manor. I kowtowed four thousand and nine hundred times for the chance to see him once! By the end, my forehead was bleeding, my face was rubbed raw, but he? He didn’t even deign to see me! His mother and father—our parents—were dying! He didn’t want to hear it!”

As Su Qiao’s hatred swelled, she grabbed handfuls of her own loose hair, eyes gleaming with sickly light. “Tell me! Why shouldn’t I have killed him? Because he had his own difficulties? Because he didn’t know what was going on? Because he lived off someone else and was ignored due to his low rank? Ha, save it!” Su Qiao spat. “He’s been stupid since he was little! A useless waste of space!”

The wooden figurine had scrambled into the qiankun pouch in terror earlier; at this, it stuck its head out and mumbled, “I thought the person who moved my corpse was someone formidable; I hadn’t expected it to be a madwoman…”

“You’re the mad one!” Su Qiao raged. “I did nothing wrong!” She spun to look at Gu Mang. “Sure, you saw his memories, but have you seen mine?!

“Lotus Village is completely covered in diseased miasma—the villagers are desperately poor, and most of them don’t have the money to go anywhere else. No one gets to live long, including his parents! I thought after he married the little miss of the Bai Clan everything would improve, but what did he do? He mentioned his difficulties in his letter, that he had no choice—but who *doesn’t* have difficulties, who is truly free and unfettered?” These words had been dammed up in her heart for too long; Su Qiao shrieked them, hysterical. “*That’s* the reason he stood by and did nothing when his parents were on death’s door?! Because of his cowardice, Mom and Dad died in agony. They didn’t even get to see their son one last time! How much do you think I hated him?”

Gu Mang gazed at her. It was already nearing dusk. The bloody light of the setting sun poured onto the brick and found its match in the crazed scarlet of Su Qiao’s eyes.

“That’s why you hid the news of your adoptive parents’ deaths,” said Gu Mang. “They were very sick, and the other villagers were afraid of getting infected themselves. They didn’t dare get close. You’ve sought revenge since that day, haven’t you?”

“So what if I did?!” Su Qiao bit out. “Initially, I had no hope of retaliating against them. But even the heavens couldn’t bear to see his betrayal go unpunished. They led me to the black magic spells of the Liao Kingdom…”

Mo Xi frowned. “How did the Liao Kingdom’s black magic spells appear in a village in Chonghua?”

“They were probably just fragments, and not of any formidable spells,” Gu Mang said. “Such books are sometimes available on the black market; there are plenty of students at the cultivation academy who buy them and read them for fun. No one really dares to follow the instructions—the Liao Kingdom’s techniques are all deathly malevolent, so who knows

what’ll happen if you work any of those spells? I wouldn’t touch a book like that even if you gave it to me for free.”

But Su Qiao snorted. “That’s right…” She narrowed her eyes. “They were fragments, and they did come at a high cost.” She bared her teeth in a grin. “But even so—the techniques of Chonghua can only be used by people with a natural potential for cultivation; the Liao Kingdom’s techniques aren’t so picky. It doesn’t matter if you’re a beggar or a whore. As long as you’re willing to pay the price, anyone can become a cultivator—ha ha ha! What’s wrong with that?!”

“You truly have gone insane,” Mo Xi said at last.

“Insane? No—I’m more sane than I’ve ever been! There were all sorts of spells written on those fragments. I followed the instructions and spread the rumors about the fertility spirit for years. The people of the Bai Clan are selfish and mercenary. Only by dangling what they wanted most before them as bait would they deign to come to a poor and secluded little village like this.”

“So you were just using me?” the wooden figurine shouted in anger.

“What else would I be doing?” Su Qiao replied coldly.

“To make people believe the tale you invented about praying for children at Lotus Village, you moved corpses and cast spells, promoted a set of brazen lies, and killed so many people.” Gu Mang closed his eyes. “Miss Su, why resort to all this?”

“Because I wanted to!” she shrilled. “I told you why that rainy night—the only people who can afford to pray at that temple are rich lords and ladies. They can die for all I care! Haven’t we all endured enough suffering in our daily lives?”

The wooden figurine found her words rather stirring. It was about to start clapping when it caught sight of Gu Mang’s expression, and those little wooden hands came trembling down.

Gu Mang studied her. “You set up this scheme because you believed they wouldn’t come back to Lotus Village for any other reason. But after you poisoned Lin Yun, you read his memories.”

Su Qiao averted her eyes. She didn’t deny it.

“You should have realized by now that in truth, they were only waiting to hear from you. Once your anger faded and you invited them, they would’ve come back,” Gu Mang said. “As for Bai Rouxia, she understood you better than even Lin Yun. She said the Bai Clan’s actions over the past few years weighed heavily on her conscience.”

“Bullshit!” Su Qiao let out an explosive howl. Her pale face flushed red, eyes bulging from their sockets. “She lied! She was a hypocrite! She was just pretending! Th-they…” She went mute, her bloodshot eyes glistening with tears.

“Filled with guilt and fully trusting, they came back with so many demon-dispelling tools and herbs,” Gu Mang said slowly. “But before they had the chance to give them to you, your poison wine murdered them.”

Su Qiao convulsed, her jerking movements almost comical, but her face betrayed no surprise. After the Lin couple died, Su Qiao must have gone through their luggage and discovered those qiankun pouches they’d never had a chance to give her.

“Bullshit! *Bullshit!* They were fake memories, he was coming up with lies, he wanted to trick me!”

“Memories can’t lie.”

“How would you know?!” Su Qiao shrieked until her voice was cracking, but her tears came streaming down. She was at once utterly heartbroken and hysterical. “I was right to kill them! I was right to hate them! Everything I’ve done and planned over the past few years was *right*!”

The wooden figurine trembled and shrank back into the qiankun pouch.

Gu Mang sighed; he couldn’t wake someone pretending to be asleep. He watched the woman breaking down in the slanting light of the setting sun, his expression troubled.

Su Qiao rushed forward, staggering toward that limp corpse on the ground. “I didn’t do anything wrong… It was her fault. She didn’t deserve

to have so much. I've gone so far; I can no longer turn back. I'll take her place… I *will*… None of you can stop me…"

The moment she grabbed Bai Rouxia's corpse, the flesh on her body began to seethe like boiling lava. Her features became Bai Rouxia's again. But the process was clearly agonizing. She screamed with her face turned up to the sky. Her breathing came faster and faster as she mumbled incessantly, "Blood from a black dog… Blood from a black dog… I need to drink blood from a black dog…"

She was in a terrible state. Her face that resembled Bai Rouxia's began to bleed from eyes, mouth, and nose as she tore at her clothes in agony, revealing an even more terrifying sight—the body beneath her clothes was a mess of rotting flesh.

Mo Xi could no longer bear to watch. But as he stepped forward, a hand reached out and stopped him.

Gu Mang's expression was cast in the dark gold of twilight. Mo Xi had never seen him so serious. His eyes fixed on Su Qiao, he said to Mo Xi, "You can't help her… These are the consequences of recklessly using the Liao Kingdom's malevolent techniques. She's already near death. When she refused to surrender earlier, it was merely the final struggle of a trapped beast. Did you see? Everything beneath her collarbones has already rotted away."

"Why would she…"

"You heard her say so earlier," Gu Mang replied. "She thought Bai Rouxia didn't deserve what she had. She must have found a permanent transformation spell within the black magic spells—she wanted to take Bai Rouxia's place after she killed her. If she'd succeeded, Su Qiao would have returned to the capital in the guise of Bai Rouxia and continued the work she wanted to do."

The woman in the courtyard was still screaming and laughing madly. Her face looked more and more like Bai Rouxia's, but she continued to bleed, the bright scarlet gradually turning an ominous black.

"But she failed," Gu Mang continued softly. "Bai Rouxia's corpse energy has infected her. She's been using the blood from black dogs to slow

her own putrefaction, but it barely makes a difference."

Su Qiao was screaming shrilly. "No one can stop me—I'm about to succeed! I've done nothing wrong, I was right to kill them, I was right…"

Gu Mang lowered his soft lashes, breaking the shattered light in his eyes. The sunset bloodied the ground as the woman continued to scream.

"Have you figured out why we couldn't tell what was off about her earlier?" Gu Mang closed his eyes. "Because she wasn't dead. But after she used dark magic to try and devour Bai Rouxia's corpse, she wasn't alive either."

Whether Su Qiao acknowledged it or not, regret was worthless after a choice had been made. A wrongful death was still wrong. Nothing in this dreadful situation was salvageable.

At last, the sun sank below the horizon.

Crows cawed in the branches overhead. All that remained between heaven and earth was a hint of golden-red, until that, too, was swallowed by the darkness. The withered leaves in the courtyard drifted with the wind as Su Qiao—a rotting body that had been struggling on for nearly a month—was wholly devoured by the black magic curse, becoming a sacrifice at the altar of malevolent magic. That beautiful seamstress from Lin Yun's memories, the one with a burden too great on her slight shoulders, dissolved into a puddle of blood in the same garden she'd toiled within all her life.

The wooden figurine crawled out of the qiankun pouch, walking a melancholy circle around the pool of bloody swill. It stared for a long time, mumbling things like, "Serves you right; who let you exploit me," and "Ah, to be honest, we're the same; we both lived hard lives, but you went a lot crazier than I did," and "Living women are so scary; dead women are still better."

After rambling for a while, he realized Gu Mang was silently examining Bai Rouxia's corpse. Mo Xi had returned to the house and found the book of black magic spells Su Qiao used in a secret compartment of the loom. Gu Mang flipped through it—every spell Su Qiao had used was detailed within. But there was still something exceedingly odd.

According to the book, the permanent transformation spell didn’t require the original owner’s body—to perform it, Su Qiao only had to remember what Bai Rouxia looked like. There was no need whatsoever to hide her corpse in the back garden, even soaking it in healing fluid to keep it from decaying.

The wooden figurine tottered over and sat down by Gu Mang, who was staring absently into the middle distance.

“In case you forgot, that corpse lady could move,” said the doll. “She was choking you just a bit ago.”

Gu Mang ignored the remarks, chin in hand as he sank into dazed thought over this one out-of-place detail.

After a time, footsteps came from behind him. Mo Xi handed Gu Mang a dilapidated wooden box.

“What’s this?”

“Something that will make you feel worse. I found it at the very bottom of the pile of those black dog corpses. Take a minute to decide if you want to see it.”

Gu Mang took the box and opened it without thinking.

Two thin sheets of paper lay within, clearly torn out of the book of black magic spells. Su Qiao probably valued these two pages most of all, and worried others might discover or destroy them, so she’d hidden them beneath that horrifying pile of dog corpses.

Gu Mang picked up those two thin pages. Written at the top of the first was: *Holy Pharmacopoeia of Dispelling Diseased Miasma.* This page was from a book put out by Medicine Master Jiang’s manor, filled with the medicinal remedies that the Liao Kingdom used to dispel diseased miasma. The procedure required a few hundred types of expensive herbs. The page related that if they were refined using the proper spellcraft and scattered around an afflicted city, the miasma would be dispelled, and remain so for ten or more years.

Gu Mang grimaced as he looked up at Mo Xi. “Miss Su planned to use this method to dispel the diseased miasma in Lotus Village after she

turned into Young Mistress Bai.”

“Do you think it would have worked?” asked Mo Xi.

“The Liao Kingdom’s techniques are evil, but their remedies for dispelling diseased miasma are probably pretty effective. The better half of their territory is plagued with it, so remedies like these are widespread over there.”

Gu Mang tucked the paper into his lapels and picked up the second page. But before he could begin to read, Mo Xi called out, “You…”

“What is it?”

Mo Xi was silent for a moment, then shook his head. “Nothing.”

Gu Mang’s gaze fixed upon that second page.

Soul-Connection Corpse Replacement Technique.

Upon first read, nothing much came to mind. All he felt was an understandable sense of sadness. He read it again in bewilderment.

Gu Mang was bright; there were few techniques he couldn’t grasp after reading them twice. Yet he read this Soul-Connection Corpse Replacement Technique a full four times before he looked up, heart roiling with horror. Perhaps he hadn’t misunderstood at first—he was merely afraid to believe what he’d read was true. In fact, he’d had a faint sense of what this was the moment he’d seen the title.

Soul-Connection Corpse Replacement

Use one’s own body as the sacrifice to summon the soul of the deceased. The deceased’s body must be whole and unharmed, and the sacrifice must become wholly identical to the deceased by using the Permanent Transformation Technique in order to trick the judges of the Yellow Springs. The transformation will not be immediately successful and may vacillate between appearances inconsistently. The necessary items for the spellcaster are listed below…

Then came many rows of small text, but Gu Mang couldn’t bear to read on. He skipped down to the last lines:

This technique is dangerous. Immediately after it’s performed, the corpse of the deceased will be able to walk and talk. As time passes, the sacrifice will experience excruciating pain that can only be suppressed by an array formed with the blood of a black dog. But the putrefaction of the flesh cannot be stopped. The sacrifice’s flesh will fester as the deceased’s soul returns to their original body, and then decay into pus and blood. Out of a hundred attempts, less than five succeed.

Think thrice before proceeding.

Gu Mang held this page vacantly, feeling cold all over.

Now he understood. Su Qiao had originally wanted to kill the Lin couple, replace Bai Rouxia, and return to the Bai Clan in her guise. But she discovered the qiankun pouches they’d brought with them while she was dealing with their corpses and felt a sense of unease. So she’d read Lin Yun’s memories.

Perhaps this was the point at which her mind began to collapse. Su Qiao had always been obdurate and competitive. Though she refused to admit the plan she’d prepared for so many years was wrong, remorse still kept her from using the Permanent Transformation Technique to become Bai Rouxia. Instead, she chose the dangerous Soul-Connection Corpse Replacement Technique in hopes of using her own life to recall from the Yellow Springs the woman she had killed through a horrible mistake.

Gu Mang had guessed almost all of Su Qiao’s secrets correctly, but he’d been wrong about one thing: Su Qiao hadn’t wanted to live in Bai Rouxia’s place—she’d wanted to die in her stead.

Night fell, and clouds gathered thick over the sky. Lightning flashed in the distance. It was still the stormy beginning of summer; this was the weather that met them the day they first came to Lotus Village. Mo Xi found a place to lay out Bai Rouxia’s corpse, then turned to Gu Mang, still

staring at that second sheet of paper. He sighed. “It’s going to rain. Let’s go inside.”

Gu Mang looked up sluggishly and stared at Mo Xi. Then he sniffed and forced himself to smile. “I’ve just been soaked in corpse water; it’ll be good to rinse off in the rain. You go on in—I’ll follow in a bit.” He stood up, dusting himself off as if nothing was wrong.

“Why don’t I stand here in the rain with you?” the wooden figurine suggested tactlessly. “I also fell in the corpse water, and now that I’m a tree person, will I shrivel if I’m not watered?”

It would have kept on babbling if Mo Xi hadn’t lifted it off its feet and dropped it into his own qiankun pouch. Taking one last glance at Gu Mang’s back, he strode into the house.

The room was still draped with silks, as if veiled in a lingering dream. Thunder rumbled from the far reaches of the horizon. Minutes later, a torrential rain came pouring down—it would be another long, dark night. Mo Xi stood in the center of the room, gazing at that yellow gauze where Bai Rouxia had been.

That night, when they’d come in to take shelter from the rain, Su Qiao must have been casting the soul-connecting spell. When they came, the corpse could obey commands, but it was too stiff to go upstairs. She couldn’t hide it there. Yet Su Qiao hadn’t had the heart to make Bai Rouxia stand in the pouring rain outside, so she’d ordered the corpse to stay still behind the veil despite the risk of discovery.

She wasn’t stupid. But she’d had guilt in her heart, and words trapped in her throat.

Suddenly, the mournful sound of a suona cut through the wind and rain outside, piercing the thunder and lightning, into the Nine Heavens. Yet its bright tone was lifeless, failing to settle on one song, as if the one playing didn’t know what he was doing either. The tune wandered mindlessly, going from “Phoenix Homage” to “Plentiful Grain,” and finally to “Wedding Sedan,” the notes weaving in between the sounds of rain and thunder.

Only after a long time did the suona fall silent. Gu Mang pushed open the door. He was soaked to the skin, those black eyes shining and wet.

“Is it washed away yet?” Mo Xi asked.

Gu Mang looked back in confusion, unsure if Mo Xi was asking about the corpse water on his body or the bloody swill Su Qiao had left behind on the ground. But as Mo Xi emerged from the shadows, coming to a stop a few steps away and gazing at him, his eyes told Gu Mang the answer.

He sniffled, looking down and smiling bitterly. “It’s pouring out there. It was all gone pretty quickly.”

Mo Xi said nothing more. After a breath, they spoke at the same time: “I want to bring their bodies back to the Bai Clan myself.”

They both fell silent.

Gu Mang gazed blankly at Mo Xi, who looked as unaffected as ever as he stood with his arms crossed, leaning against the wall.

Mo Xi nodded. “And the spirit you sealed in the wooden puppet. After we return, let’s find someone to help him pass on. He was wrongfully executed, then made resentful by the black magic qi. It wasn’t his choice to become what he is.”

Gu Mang stood stunned for a moment, then smiled. This time, his happiness was real. He brushed back the wet hair flopping over his forehead and gave Mo Xi two very solemn thumbs-up. “Okay. But, before we go, I want to help Miss Su and the others finish one thing…” He pointed at the first paper Su Qiao had left behind, then turned to Mo Xi. “Would Mo-gongzi agree to assist?”

Although the ingredients listed on the *Holy Pharmacopoeia of Dispelling Diseased Miasma* that Su Qiao had hidden were rare and expensive, Mo Xi was from one of the most illustrious families in the capital. The qiankun pouch he carried with him contained all kinds of holy medicines. The two of them made the medicinal powder quickly and walked out the village gate. Mo Xi had freed the little wooden figurine, which was allowed to march clumsily behind them.

“Come, Gu Mang-gege will put on a show for you.” Holding the packet of medicine between his teeth, Gu Mang spread his hands and dashed up the high archway of the gate as if it were flat ground. Stepping up onto the arched eaves, he waved at Mo Xi.

The clouds had cleared. The sickle moon hung bright in the sky, and dawn had not yet come, though a thread of red had begun to snake along the horizon. Gu Mang took the paper packet from his mouth and summoned his suona—Fengbo. With one hand on his hip and the other holding the instrument’s stem, he leaned back and drew in a breath, then blew one long note on the suona. Instantly, wisps of faint gray smoke came drifting from the instrument’s mouth. The smoke gathered more and more densely, until it coalesced at last into a flock of pale gray magpies fluttering in front of Gu Mang. The birds flapped their wings, gleaming motes of light falling like dust from the tips of their feathers.

“Be good, babies.” Gu Mang smiled and stepped forward. Extending a hand, he let the magpie king with his trailing tail feathers land securely on his fingertips.

“You know what to do.” Gu Mang told him, passing the paper packet into the bird’s burgundy beak. The magpie king twittered, and Gu Mang nuzzled his head tenderly. “Okay, go, dispel all of that diseased miasma.”

The gray magpie beat his wings and flew off, soaring into the sky with the medicinal powder scattering behind him. The rest of the flock streamed after, dusting powder on their wings as they filled the sky and fanned out in all directions, charging into the thick miasma that had hung over the village for too long.

The miasma scattered beneath the wings of the magpies. The light of dawn grew brighter and brighter. Gu Mang watched the flock fly low and smiled as he raised the suona once again, closing his eyes to play.

“*The woven veils lie tucked within boxes of jade, the doors of the sewing shop have been open since the coming of night. Chang’e falls alongside the moon, and Zhinü comes with the revolution of the stars. Lamenting how short the night before their parting, facing the empty loom after farewell, she pleads with the magpies not to fly after the bridge*.”[9]

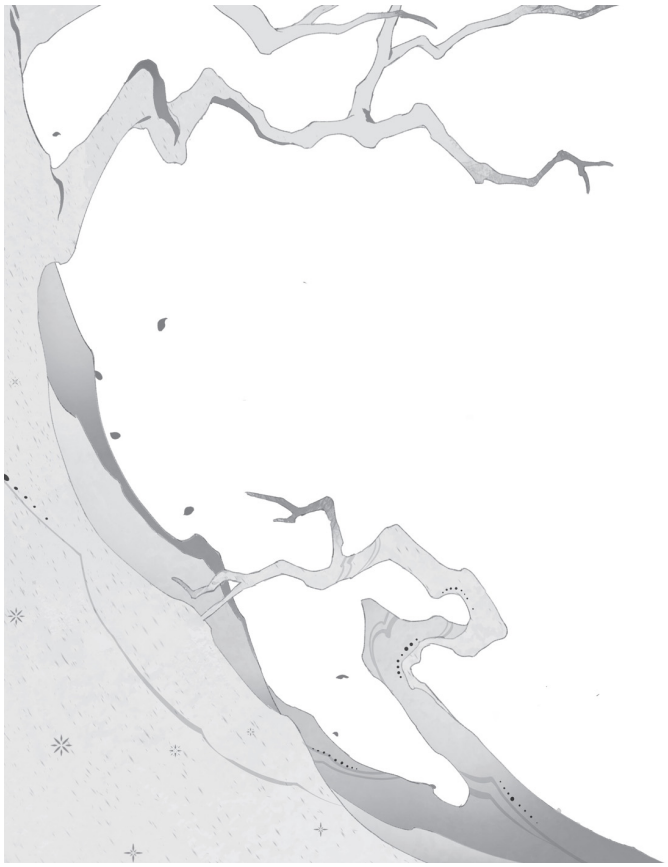
The last note sounded as the morning sun burst over the horizon. Gu Mang stood on the peak of the gate archway, at the bright border between twilight and dawn. Fastened with a silver clasp, his ponytail swayed in the wind and the white ribbon in his hand fluttered, dyed a faint warm red by the first rays of sunrise as they fell upon the earth.

He suddenly cupped his hands around his mouth and yelled like a little madman, shouting with coarse rural vigor. “Hey—brothers! Sisters! Ancestors! Descendants! The sun is shining! *The sun is shining*!”

As Gu Mang shouted, he looked down at Mo Xi standing against the light beneath the archway. Gu Mang couldn’t see what expression he wore, but he himself started smiling, the lines of his joy creeping up from the corners of his lips to those brilliant black eyes.

The sun was shining. The darkness of the diseased miasma had disappeared. After the long night passed, this realm finally welcomed an expanse of splendid light.

The colors of the sunrise were so beautiful. They rivaled the loveliest of flowers, so dazzling they seemed unreal—just like those dream-like days of their youthful past.



Remnants of Filth
FIN

Afterword

THE ENGLISH PUBLICATION of *Remnants of Filth* is complete! First of all, thank you to the readers who've come with us on this journey! And thank you to everyone who worked so hard on the publication of this book—thank you very much!

Since I have the opportunity, I'd like to talk a little about the process of writing *Remnants of Filth* and my thoughts on it.

Writing this book wasn't easy. At the time, I was obligated to start my next novel, so planning *Remnants of Filth* was a rushed process. For many reasons, my initial outline underwent last-minute changes, and so the writing of *Remnants of Filth* was mostly done as I was posting each chapter. In comparison to *The Husky and His White Cat Shizun* and *Case File Compendium*, I didn't have as much time to brainstorm and edit—so even though I did my best under the circumstances, I'm not fully satisfied with the final story. This is why I rarely mention *Remnants of Filth*. If I'd written this novel under different circumstances at a different time, it would probably be better. Though I invested as much of my energy and ability as I could, I still feel like I didn't write it very well. The love it's received makes me feel a little guilty.

Gu Mang and Mo Xi are both characters I find hard to write. I wanted to challenge myself and write a pairing I'm not used to creating, but I feel like I wasn't fully successful. I'm mostly satisfied with the characterization of Gu Mang's devotion to his brothers and country, but I found that when I focused too passionately on this aspect in my descriptions of him, what happened was that I realized I wanted to write more about these feelings, but that my motivation to write about his interactions with Mo Xi was weaker. When writing the latter part of Gu Mang's character arc, I found it hard to naturally incorporate Mo Xi—which isn't to say Mo Xi isn't important to Gu Mang, but rather that I had trouble grasping the feeling of their interactions due to my inexperience with creating characters with their personalities. That's why the story began with a focus on plot instead of their relationship, and why *Remnants of Filth* basically never had any fluff.

I hope that, when I next have the energy to write characters outside of my comfort zone, I'll have better results.

The character in *Remnants of Filth* that surprised me most was actually Murong Lian. In the beginning, I described him more along the lines of a flat side character whom everyone could hate on, but as soon as he appeared and I wrote a few paragraphs about his behavior, I felt like he came to life. I could feel how interesting he was—he didn't want to obey me as an author. I even tried to make him way more evil to see how it would look, but I eventually had to admit his evil only made him more interesting to me. This is the part of character creation I love the most. Whenever I find myself in this kind of state, I know I don't have to worry about writing this character anymore. I become a mere archivist, recording their own thoughts, their own fate, and their own plans.

Predictably, Murong Lian ended up changing his fate all on his own, veering far away from the flat evil side role I'd assigned him and somehow carving out a place for himself in the grand finale. What did I do in this process? I feel like I didn't do anything at all. A character coming to life on his own sounds fantastical, but I believe some of you who also have experience writing will understand the feeling I'm talking about—these characters do, in fact, exist. I like to call them "flow" characters. Ha ha ha, like the character isn't just a character anymore—like he has a heart of his own, one that expresses itself naturally when he's on the page. You can't disobey his will, or you'll ruin his story. I love this kind of feeling, but unfortunately, it doesn't come for all characters—and some characters I intentionally try to build out turn out less successful than those I wrote without overthinking. Every time I meet a flow character like this, I'm surprised and delighted, because it's the sort of fated connection that only comes by accident and can't be forced.

But the characters who fill me with the most regret are Chen Tang and Hua Po'an. Some readers might find their story familiar, like they somewhat resemble Mo Ran and Chu Wanning from their first life. This is because, in the original draft, they were indeed Mo Ran and Chu Wanning from the first lifetime. *Remnants of Filth* was originally written to be a transmigration story, where Mo Xi and Gu Mang were both police officers

and Gu Mang was undercover. After something happened to Gu Mang, Mo Xi transmigrated into a novel Gu Mang had written…that's how the story initially unfolded. In the original setting, as the story progressed, one of the scenes would've been Gu Mang and Mo Xi arriving in an illusionscape of a different book—*The Husky and His White Cat Shizun*, which I'd only just completed. I wanted to write a Wushan Palace Illusion dungeon and have them realize some of Taxian-jun's dreams and desires inside the illusion.

Unfortunately, the editor at the time was concerned Gu Mang's undercover cop backstory and much of his outlined story would be unsuitable for publication. I ended up having to hastily edit out the transmigration element shortly after I announced the new title. For this and all sorts of other reasons, I couldn't write Gu Mang and Mo Xi entering the Wushan Palace Illusion dungeon into the new story, and as for these two missing yet important characters, I could only rework them a little. But because the structure of the story was already largely set, and so were their personalities, it wasn't possible to excise them entirely, nor change them too much from their original form. That's why the characters of Chen Tang and Hua Po'an ended up imperfect. I started out wanting to write *Wushan Palace Illusion: Taxian-jun's Desires*, but it very sadly turned into *The Original Story the Author Wanted to Write: The Author's Desires*… I regret this a lot!

In summary, *Remnants of Filth* was written under pressure—both the timing of its serialization as well as everything that happened throughout was seriously awful. And because of the strain I was under, I was so stressed and tired my immune system collapsed and I ended up in the hospital with shingles. In hindsight, I feel like successfully writing any story really does require a great deal of luck. Afterward, I wanted to build a pristine environment for my work, one that wouldn't be impacted or influenced by anything. A state of flow is irresistible to authors. It's a wonderful, almost out-of-body experience, and I trust that those of you with a similar interest, one you love and invest time and energy in, have also felt that kind of dissociative state. Maybe that's the state of mind most loved and treasured by all creators, and to me, entering it requires a separation from all outside influence and freedom from any restrictions or distractions.

These are my hopes and wishes for all my future creations.

I hope to continue writing like this forever. I hope I can answer my next challenge with something I’m satisfied with and create a better journey of imagination for my readers.

Thank you again to all my readers! And another thank you to those who worked on this publication!

Thank you so very much. I wish you happiness and joy every single day.

Rou Bao Bu Chi Rou

October 9, 2024

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完结小记

《余污》的英文版完结啦，首先想感谢一路陪伴的读者朋友！感谢为本书出版付出过努力的各位老师，谢谢你们！

既然有这样一个机会，我想和大家聊一聊余污的创作过程和感想。

这一本书当时写的并不是太顺手，加上当时已经到了需要创作一本新书的时间了，有点赶鸭子上架的意味，当时设定的大纲因为各种原因不得不进行了临时修改，所以其实《余污》的写作是即时性很强的。相较于《二哈和他的白猫师尊》以及《病案本》，我写《余污》的时候并没有太多时间进行反复构思和内容修改，所以虽然我在当时的情况下已经尽到了自己最大的努力，但是最终的内容呈现，我依然是不太满意的，这也是为什么我很少提及《余污》的原因。我想如果换一个时间段，换一种情况写这个故事，应该会写的更好一些，虽然我自己能投入的精力和能力在当时已经调到了最大值，但我仍然感觉自己没有做到很好，对于大家的喜爱，总是有些受之有愧。

顾茫和墨熄都是对我而言比较有难度的主角，我想挑战一下自己，写一对我不太擅长塑造的攻受类型，不过我觉得挑战不太成功。顾茫在兄弟情和家国义这一块的塑造，我是基本还算满意的，但是过于把热切的写作欲望投放在这一方面的结果就是，后期我觉得我描写他的时候，会有更多的渴望去写他对家国兄弟的情义，而描写他和墨熄的互动的动力，反而逊色了许多。我好像很难在顾茫后期的人物成长弧光里，很自然地将墨熄融入进去，这不是说墨熄对顾茫而言不重要，而是我因对这一类角色性格的塑造不熟悉，有点把握不住两人之间互动感觉了，于是故事开始侧重于推动剧情往前，而感情描写渐少，这就导致了余污基本上没怎么甜过。我很希望下次再有心力写一写自己舒适圈之外的主角类型时，能有更好的发挥。

《余污》里面最让我自己意外的角色，其实是慕容怜，这个角色我一开始只是想往一个人人喊打的扁平配角进行描写的，但是他一出场，写了两三段他的言行举止后，我就感觉到这个角色他好像开始活了，我能感觉到他很有意思，他不想听我这个作者的话，我甚至试着尽量再把他写得坏一些，看看效果会怎么样，可是最终我不得不承认，他坏得很让我觉得新鲜，这是我在塑造人物时最喜欢的状态，当这种状态被唤出来时，我就知道这个人，不需要我再替他操心了，我从此只是一个记录者，他有自己的想法，他自己的命运，他自有安排。

果不其然，慕容怜最终自己逆天改命了，和我原本给他预设的一个扁平恶毒配角不怎么相干，最后甚至能在结局占有一席之地，我在这过程中做了什么呢？我想我什么也没做，角色会自己活起来这种事情听起来玄之又玄，不过我相信一部分和我一样有过写作经历的人，应该能够理解我说的那种感觉，它确实是真实存在的，我觉得可以把它称为心流角色，哈哈哈，也就是这个角色不再是一个人设，他自己有心，他的心会直接在你写到他的时候表现出来，你不能违抗他的意愿，不然你就很容易会把他的故事写的很烂。我特别喜欢这种状态，可惜不是每个角色都能遇到的，甚至我觉得有时候刻意去堆砌的人设，反而不如寥寥几笔，无心之下写的人物成功。每当遇到这种心流角色时，我都超级惊喜激动，因为这实在是可遇不可求的缘分。

而让我最感到遗憾的人物设定，其实是沉棠和花破暗，可能会有读者对他们的故事感到有些熟悉，会觉得某些地方有些像墨燃和楚晚宁的前世，这其实是因为他们俩在原稿的框架设定中确实就是前世

墨燃和楚晚宁。因为《余污》原稿设定是穿书文，墨熄是警察，顾茫是警察卧底，墨熄在顾茫出事后，穿入了顾茫写的小说里……故事就是这样展开的。在《余污》原设定内，随着故事的发展，会有一段剧情是顾茫墨熄来到了另一本书的幻境世界中，那本书就是我当时刚刚完结的《二哈》，我原本想写一段“巫山殿幻境副本”，让他们完成踏仙君在幻境中的执念心愿。但是真的很可惜，顾茫的卧底设定经过当时编辑的一些了解，认为我很多预设的卧底内容可能有些不太适合，于是穿书的设定就在宣布更新时间不久被我不得不全部仓促改掉了，又因为各种各样的原因，我最终也没能将原本顾茫墨熄进入“巫山殿幻境”副本的剧情成功地修改进新的故事设定里，而对于空缺出来的这两个关键人物，我只能重新进行了一些塑造，但是因为故事的大致结构就在那里，人物性格也就在那里，完全删除也不太可能，也不太可能彻底跳出既定框架，所以塑造出的角色就实在有些差强人意了。没想到当时想写的是“巫山殿幻境·踏仙君的执念”，最后却很倒霉地成了“没有写成的原定故事·作者的执念”……这一点真的是很遗憾！

如果要总结的话，《余污》是一次夹缝中的更新，无论是当时的更新时间，还是遇到的各种事情，都实在太难受了，我中间甚至因为身心压力都太大太疲惫，免疫力下降得非常厉害，得了带状疱疹进了医院。现在回想起来，我会觉得一本书能够顺利写成，确实是需要天时地利人和的。从那之后，我始终都想给自己创造一个干干净净，尽量不受到任何打扰和影响的创作环境。对于写手而言，心流状态是最令人欲罢不能的，那种奇妙的感受如同灵魂出窍，相信各位朋友若是有一样非常投入非常喜欢的兴趣，一定也感受过那种“无我”的状态，那或许是所有创作人都最喜欢也最宝贵的状态，而这种状态的唤出，对我而言，必须要一个与一切外物杂念绝缘的状态，不受任何干扰和约束地排兵布阵。

这就是我对今后创作的期待与渴望。

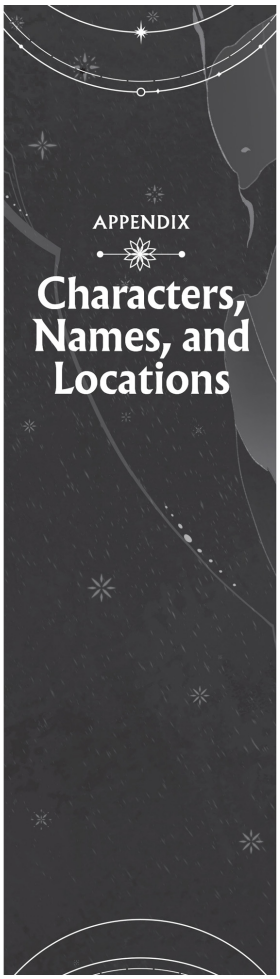
我希望可以以这样的状态一直写下去，希望下一次的挑战，我能给自己一份满意的答卷，也能给读者打造一趟更好的幻想之旅。

再次感谢各位读者朋友！再次感谢为本书出版做出努力的老师们！

感谢感谢，祝你们幸福美满，天天开心。

肉包不吃肉

2024年10月9日



APPENDIX

Characters, Names, and Locations

Characters

Mo Xi

墨熄 Surname Mo; Given Name Xi, “extinguish”

Titles: Xihe-jun (羲和君 / “sun,” literary), General Mo

Weapons:

Shuairan (率然 / a mythical snake): A whip that can transform into a sword as needed. Named after a snake from Chinese mythology, said to respond so quickly an attack to any part of its body would be met immediately with its fangs or tail (or both). First mentioned in Sun Tzu’s *The Art of War* as an ideal for commanders to follow when training their armies.

Tuntian (吞天 / “Skyswallower”): A scepter cast with the essence of a whale spirit.

The commander of the Northern Frontier Army, Mo Xi is the only living descendant of the illustrious Mo Clan. Granted the title Xihe-jun by the late emperor, he possesses extraordinary innate spiritual abilities and has a reputation for being coldly ruthless.

Gu Mang

顾茫 Surname Gu, “to look”; Given Name Mang, “bewilderment”

Titles: Beast of the Altar, General Gu

Weapons:

Yongye (永夜 / “Evernight”): A demonic dagger from the Liao Kingdom.

Fengbo (风波 / “Wind and waves”): A suona used by General Gu.

Once the dazzling shixiong of the cultivation academy, Murong Lian’s slave, and war general to the empire of Chonghua, Gu Mang fell from grace and turned traitor, defecting to the enemy Liao Kingdom. Years

later, he was sent back to Chonghua as a prisoner of war. His name comes from the line “I unsheathe my sword and look around bewildered” in the first of three poems in the collection “Arduous Journey” by Li Bai, lamenting the sense of loss and obstruction the poet faced upon being sent away from the capital by Emperor Xuanzong.

Murong Lian

慕容怜 Surname Murong; Given Name Lian, “mercy”

Title: Wangshu-jun (望舒君 / “moon,” literary)

Weapon:

Water Demon Talisman (水鬼符): A talisman that becomes a horde of water demons to attack its target.

Gu Mang’s half brother and former master, and cousin to the current emperor, Murong Lian is the current lord of Wangshu Manor and the owner of Luomei Pavilion. He is known as the “Greed” of Chonghua’s three poisons.

Jiang Yexue

江夜雪 Surname Jiang; Given Name Yexue, “evening snow”

Title: Qingxu Elder (清旭长老 / “clear dawn”)

Disowned son of the Yue Clan, Yue Chenqing’s older brother, and Mo Xi’s old friend, Jiang Yexue was not the gentleman he always appeared to be.

Yue Chenqing

岳辰晴 Surname Yue; Given Name Chenqing, “morning sun”

Title: Deputy General Yue

Young master of the Yue Clan and Murong Chuyi’s nephew, Yue Chenqing is a happy-go-lucky child with a penchant for getting into trouble.

Murong Chuyi

慕容楚衣 Surname Murong; Given Name Chuyi, surname Chu, “clothes”

Yue Chenqing’s Fourth Uncle, Chonghua’s “Ignorance,” and all-around enigma, Murong Chuyi was a master artificer whose aloof nature was partly the result of a curse inflicted on him by Jiang Yexue.

SUPPORTING CHARACTERS (IN ALPHABETICAL ORDER)

Auntie Lin

林姨

A servant in Wangshu Manor with a disfigured face. Born the younger daughter of a Chu family from Lin’an, she was Gu Mang’s mother and Murong Xuan’s former sweetheart.

Changfeng-jun

长丰君 “long, abundance”

An older noble worrying himself sick over his daughter Lan-er.

Chen Tang

沉棠 Surname Chen, Given Name Tang, “flowering apple”

Chonghua’s legendary Wise Gentleman, who was once the headmaster of the cultivation academy as well as guoshi of the nation. He perished in battle with Hua Po’an, a slave cultivator-turned-traitor whom he had personally taught.

Fandou

饭兜 “bib”

A loyal black dog and Gu Mang’s best friend.

Hua Po’an

花破暗 “flower breaking the darkness”

Title: Guoshi, “imperial preceptor”

Chonghua’s infamous first slave general. After learning cultivation under the beneficence of Chen Tang, Hua Po’an turned on Chonghua and became the founding monarch of the Liao Kingdom. After cultivating methods to attain immortality, he disguised himself as the guoshi of the Liao Kingdom for centuries and continued to control the nation from behind the scenes.

Jiang Fuli

姜拂黎 Surname Jiang; Given Name Fuli, “to brush away, multitudes”

Also known by his title of Medicine Master, Jiang Fuli is the finest healer in Chonghua, dubbed the “Wrath” of Chonghua’s three poisons.

Jingchen

净尘 “Purify filth”

The weakened form of the Demonblood Beast and the Liao Kingdom guoshi’s pet obsession.

Lan-er

兰儿“orchid”

A sweet little girl with a dangerously volatile spiritual core.

Li Wei

李微 Surname Li; Given Name Wei, “slight”

The competent, if harried, head housekeeper of Xihe Manor.

Lu Zhanxing

陆展星 Surname Lu; Given Name Zhanxing, “to exhibit stars”

Gu Mang’s oldest friend, who grew up with him as a slave in Wangshu Manor. Later his deputy general of the Wangba Army.

Murong Chen, the Emperor

慕容辰 Surname Murong, given name Chen, “morning”

Title: His Imperial Majesty, “junshang”

Eccentric ruler of the empire of Chonghua, who developed demonic techniques in secret. There is a cultural taboo against using the emperor’s given name.

Murong Mengze

慕容梦泽 Surname Murong; Given Name Mengze, “Yunmeng Lake”

A master healer and the “Virtue” of Chonghua’s three gentlemen, Mengze’s frail constitution and graceful, refined manner are known to all.

Murong Xuan

慕容玄 Surname Murong, given name Xuan, “dark”

The late Wangshu-jun, and the father of Murong Lian and Gu Mang.

Su Yurou

苏玉柔 Surname Su; Given Name Yurou, “jade, soft”

Known as the most peerless beauty in Chonghua. Jiang Fuli's reclusive wife.

Yue Juntian

岳钧天 Surname Yue, given name Juntian, "great sky"

The patriarch of the Yue Clan and a master artificer.

Zhao Susu (Madam Zhao)

赵素素 Surname Zhao, given name Susu, "pure"

Murong Xuan's wife and Murong Lian's mother, a beautiful woman of aristocratic birth.

Zhou He

周鹤 Surname Zhou, given name He, "crane"

Weapon:

Lieying (猎鹰): A pitch-black dagger.

The leader of Sishu Terrace. Obsessed with discovering new magical techniques using any means necessary.

Locations

Dongting Lake

洞庭湖

A real lake in northeastern Hunan, named "Grotto Court Lake" for the dragon court that was said to reside in its depths.

Luomei Pavilion

落梅别苑 “Gardens of Fallen Plum Blossoms”

A house of pleasure where the nobility of Chonghua could have their pick of captives from enemy nations.

Shennong Terrace

神农台

The healers’ ministry of Chonghua. Shennong is the deity and mythological ruler said to have taught agriculture and herbal medicine to the ancient Chinese people.

Warrior Soul Mountain

战魂山

Where the heroes of Chonghua are laid to rest.

Cixin Artificing Forge

慈心冶炼铺 “Kind Heart”

A shabby forge in Chonghua’s capital where uncommonly humane spiritual weapons are refined.

Dream Butterfly Islands

梦碟岛

An archipelago of demonic islands not far from Chonghua. The archipelago is composed of around twenty islands, and different types of demons live on each one.

Da’ze City

大泽城 “Large Pond”

One of Chonghua's major border cities, located near a lake, where Chen Tang once sealed the Demonblood Beast.

Bat Island

蝙蝠岛

One of the Dream Butterfly Islands, Bat Island is inhabited by fire bats, demons descended from the feathered tribe of Mount Jiuhua. The bats on their island are led by their queen, Wuyan.

Sishu Terrace

司术台 "Overseeing Magic"

An organization in Chonghua specializing in magical techniques and healing.

Golden Terrace

黄金台

The most secretive and secluded hall at the back of the imperial palace, reserved for the emperor's most trusted subjects.

Name Guide

Diminutives, nicknames, and name tags

A-: Friendly diminutive. Always a prefix. Usually for monosyllabic names, or one syllable out of a two-syllable name.

Doubling: Doubling a syllable of a person's name can be a nickname, e.g., "Mangmang"; it has childish or cutesy connotations.

Xiao-: A diminutive meaning "little." Always a prefix.

Lao-: A familiar prefix meaning "old." Usually used for older men.

-er: An affectionate diminutive added to names, literally “son” or “child.” Always a suffix.

-zi: Affectionate suffix meaning “son” or “child.”

Family

Di/Didi: Younger brother or a younger male friend.

Ge/Gege/Dage: Older brother or an older male friend.

Jie/Jiejie/Zizi: Older sister or an older female friend.

-jiu/Jiujiu: Maternal uncle.

Mei/Meimei: Younger sister or a younger female friend.

Cultivation

Qianbei: A respectful title or suffix for someone older, more experienced, or more skilled in a particular discipline. Not to be used for blood relatives.

Shifu: Teacher or master.

Shijie: Older martial sister, used for older disciples or classmates.

Shixiong: Older martial brother, used for older disciples or classmates.

Shidi: Younger martial brother, used for younger disciples or classmates.

Shimei: Younger martial sister, used for younger disciples or classmates.

Daozhang/Xianjun/Xianzhang/Shenjun: Polite terms of address for cultivators. Can be used alone as a title or attached to someone’s family name.

Zongshi: A title or suffix for a person of particularly outstanding skill; largely only applied to cultivators.

Other

Gongzi: Young man from an affluent household.

Guozhu: The ruler of a nation.

-jun: A term of respect, often used as a suffix after a title.

Laoban: A term of address for a shopkeeper or the proprietor of a business that means “boss.”

-niang: Suffix for a young lady, similar to “Miss.”

Shaozhu: Young master and direct heir of a household.

-xiansheng: A polite suffix for a man, similar to “Mister.”

Xiongzhang: Respectful term of address meaning “older brother.”

Pronunciation Guide

Mandarin Chinese is the official state language of mainland China, and pinyin is the official system of romanization in which it is written. As Mandarin is a tonal language, pinyin uses diacritical marks (e.g., ā, á, ǎ, à) to indicate these tonal inflections. Most words use one of four tones, though some (as in "de" in the title below) are a neutral tone. Furthermore, regional variance can change the way native Chinese speakers pronounce the same word. For those reasons and more, please consider the guide below a simplified introduction to pronunciation of select character names and sounds from the world of Remnants of Filth.

More resources are available at sevenseasdanmei.com

NAMES

Yú Wū

Yú: Y as in **y**ou, ú as in "u" in the French "tu"

Wū as in **woo**

Mò Xī

Mò as in **mo**urning

Xī as in **chi**c

Gù Máng

Gù as in **goo**p

Máng as in **mong**rel

Mùróng Lián

Mù as in **moo**n

Róng as in **wrong /** c**rone**

Lián as in batta**lion**

Yuè Chénqíng

Yuè: Y as in **y**ammer, uè as in **whe**lp

Chén as in ki**tchen**

Qíng as in ma**tching**

Jiāng Yèxuě

Jiāng as in mah**jong**

Yè as in **ye**s

Xuě: X as in **sh**oot, uě as in **we**t

Mùróng Chǔyī

Mù as in **moo**n

Róng as in **wrong** / c**ron**e

Chǔ as in **choo**se

Yī as in **ea**se

Mùróng Mèngzé

Mù as in **mo**on

Róng as in **wrong** / c**ron**e

Mèng as in a**mong**

Zé as in pia**zza**

GENERAL CONSONANTS

Some Mandarin Chinese consonants sound very similar, such as z/c/s and zh/ch/sh. Audio samples will provide the best opportunity to learn the difference between them.

X: somewhere between the **sh** in **sh**eep and **s** in **s**ilk

Q: a very aspirated **ch** as in **ch**arm

C: **ts** as in pan**ts**

Z: **z** as in **z**oom

S: **s** as in **s**ilk

CH: **ch** as in **ch**arm

ZH: **dg** as in do**dg**e

SH: **sh** as in **sh**ave

G: hard **g** as in **g**raphic

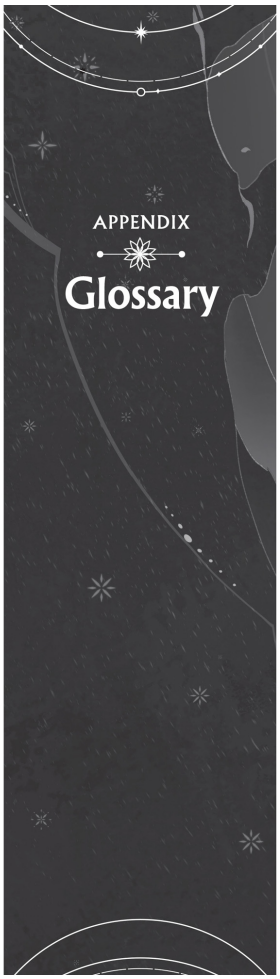
GENERAL VOWELS

The pronunciation of a vowel may depend on its preceding consonant. For example, the “i” in “shi” is distinct from the “i” in “di.” Vowel pronunciation may also change depending on where the vowel appears in a word, for example the “i” in “shi” versus the “i” in “ting.” Finally, compound vowels are often—though not always—pronounced as conjoined but separate vowels. You’ll find a few of the trickier compounds below.

IU: as in **ewe**

IE: **ye** as in **ye**s

UO: **war** as in **war**m


APPENDIX
Glossary

Appendix:
Glossary

While not required reading, this glossary is intended to offer further context for the many concepts and terms utilized throughout this novel as well as provide a starting point for learning more about the rich culture from which these stories were written.

GENRES

Danmei

Danmei (耽美 / “indulgence in beauty”) is a Chinese fiction genre focused on romanticized tales of love and attraction between men. It is analogous to the BL (boys’ love) genre in Japanese media and is better understood as a genre of plot than a genre of setting. For example, though many danmei novels feature wuxia or xianxia settings, others are better understood as tales of sci-fi, fantasy, or horror.

Wuxia

Wuxia (武侠 / “martial heroes”) is one of the oldest Chinese literary genres. Most wuxia stories are set in ancient China and feature protagonists who practice martial arts and seek to redress wrongs. Although characters may possess seemingly superhuman abilities, they are typically mastered through practice instead of supernatural or magical means. Plots tend to focus on human relationships and power struggles between various sects and alliances. To Western moviegoers, a well-known example of the genre is *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*.

Xianxia

Xianxia (仙侠 / “immortal heroes”) is a genre related to wuxia that places more emphasis on the supernatural. Some xianxia works focus on

immortal beings such as gods or demons, whereas others (such as *Remnants of Filth*) are concerned with the conflicts of mortals who practice cultivation. In the latter case, characters strive to become stronger by harnessing their spiritual powers, with some aiming to extend their lifespan or achieve immortality.

TERMINOLOGY

Cowrie shells: Cowrie shells were the earliest form of currency used in central China.

Cultivation/cultivators: Cultivation is the means by which mortals with spiritual aptitude develop and harness supernatural abilities. The practitioners of these methods are called cultivators. The path of one's cultivation is a concept that draws heavily from Daoist traditions. Generally, it comprises innate spiritual development (i.e., formation of a spiritual core) as well as spells, talismans, tools, and weapons with specific functions.

Di and shu hierarchy: Upper-class men in ancient China often took multiple wives, though only one would be the official or "di" wife, and her sons would take precedence over the sons of the "shu" wives. "Di" sons were prioritized in matters of inheritance.

Dual Cultivation: A cultivation technique involving sex between participants that is meant to improve cultivation prowess. Can also be used as a simple euphemism for sex.

Ephemera: In the world of *Remnants of Filth*, a drug from the Liao Kingdom. Its name is likely a reference to the line, "Life is like a dream ephemeral, how short our joys can be," from "A Party Amidst Brothers in the Peach Blossom Garden" by Tang dynasty poet Li Bai.

Eyes: Descriptions like "phoenix eyes" or "peach-blossom eyes" refer to eye shape. Phoenix eyes have an upturned sweep at their far corners, whereas peach-blossom eyes have a rounded upper lid and are

often considered particularly alluring. Almond eyes have a balanced shape, like their namesake.

Face: Mianzi (面子), generally translated as “face,” is an important concept in Chinese society. It is a metaphor for a person’s reputation and can be extended to further descriptive metaphors. “Thin face” refers to someone easily embarrassed or prone to offense at perceived slights. Conversely, “thick face” refers to someone who acts brazenly and without shame.

Foxglove Tree: The foxglove tree, *Paulownia tomentosa* (泡桐花 / paotonghua), also known as empress tree or princess tree, is native to China. In flower language, the foxglove tree symbolizes “eternal waiting,” specifically that of a secret admirer.

Foxtail Grass: In flower language, green foxtail grass, Setaria viridis (狗尾巴草 / gouweibacao), symbolizes “secret, difficult yearning,” often in reference to star-crossed love.

Gentleman: The term junzi (君子) is used to refer to someone of noble character. Historically, it was typically reserved for men.

Gu Poison: A legendary poison created by sealing many types of venomous creatures in one vessel until only one survivor remains, which would then possess the strongest and most complex poison. The term may be used as a stand-in for dark poisons of all types.

Guoshi: A powerful imperial official who served as an advisor to the emperor. Sometimes translated as “state preceptor,” this was a post with considerable authority in some historical regimes.

Horsetail Whisk: Consisting of a long wooden handle with horsehair bound to one end, the horsetail whisk (拂尘 / fuchen, “brushing off dust”) symbolizes cleanliness and the sweeping away of mortal concerns in Buddhist and Daoist traditions. It is usually carried in the crook of one’s arm.

Immortal-Binding Ropes or Cables: A staple of xianxia, immortal-binding cables are ropes, nets, and other restraints enchanted to withstand the power of an immortal or god. They can only be cut by high-powered spiritual items or weapons and often limit the abilities of those trapped by them.

Incense Time: A measure of time in ancient China, referring to how long it takes for a single incense stick to burn. Inexact by nature, an incense time is commonly assumed to be about thirty minutes, though it can be anywhere from five minutes to an hour.

Jade: Jade is a semi-precious mineral with a long history of ornamental and functional usage in China. The word “jade” can refer to two distinct minerals, nephrite and jadeite, which both range in color from white to gray to a wide spectrum of greens.

Jianghu: A staple of wuxia and xianxia, the jianghu (江湖 / “rivers and lakes”) describes an underground society of martial artists, monks, rogues, artisans, and merchants who settle disputes between themselves per their own moral codes.

Kowtow: The kowtow (叩头 / “knock head”) is an act of prostration where one kneels and bows low enough that their forehead touches the ground. A show of deep respect and reverence that can also be used to beg, plead, or show sincerity; in severe circumstances, it’s common for the supplicant’s forehead to end up bloody and bruised.

Lotus: This flower symbolizes purity of the heart and mind, as lotuses rise untainted from muddy waters. It also signifies the holy seat of the Buddha.

Liuli: Colorful glazed glass. When used as a descriptor for eye color, it refers to a bright brown.

Meridians: The means by which qi travels through the body, like a magical bloodstream. Medical and combat techniques that focus on redirecting, manipulating, or halting qi circulation focus on targeting the meridians at specific points on the body, known as acupoints. Techniques that can manipulate or block qi prevent a cultivator from using magical techniques until the qi block is lifted.

Mythical Creatures: Several entities from Chinese mythology make an appearance in the world of *Remnants of Filth*, including:

Azure Dragon: The Azure Dragon (苍龙 / canglong, or 青龙 / qinglong) is one of four major creatures in Chinese astronomy, representing the cardinal direction East, the element of wood, and the season of spring.

Bixi: A legendary figure who was the sixth son of the Dragon King, usually depicted as a dragon with the shell of a tortoise and traditionally used as the base of commemorative tablets.

Flame Emperor: A mythological figure said to have ruled over China in ancient times. His name is attributed to his invention of slash-and-burn agriculture. There is some debate over whether the Flame Emperor is the same being as Shennong, the inventor of agriculture, or a descendant.

Guhuo niao: A mythical bird created by the grief of women who died in childbirth; their song mimics the sound of babies crying as the bird seeks to steal chicks and human infants for itself.

Shangao: A small piglike animal said to live in the mountains, vivid scarlet in color, with a decidedly foul manner of speech.

Taotie: A mythical beast that represents greed, as it is composed of only a head and a mouth and eats everything in sight until its death. Taotie designs are symmetrical down their zoomorphic faces and most commonly seen on bronzeware from the Shang dynasty.

Tengshe, or Soaring snake: A mythical serpent that can fly.

Xingtian: A mythical deity who was decapitated in his battle with the Yellow Emperor but nevertheless continued to fight; a symbol of perseverance.

Xuannü: Also known as the Dark Lady, the goddess of sex, longevity, and war.

Zhen niao: Also known as the poison-feather bird, this mythical creature is said to be so poisonous its feathers were used in assassinations, as dipping one in wine would make it a lethal and undetectable poison.

Nine Provinces: A symbolic term for China as a whole.

Paper Money: Imitation money made from decorated sheets of paper burned as a traditional offering to the dead.

Qi: Qi (气) is the energy in all living things. Cultivators strive to manipulate qi through various techniques and tools, such as weapons, talismans, and magical objects. Different paths of cultivation provide control over specific types of qi. For example, in *Remnants of Filth*, the Liao Kingdom's techniques allow cultivators to harness demonic qi, in contrast to Chonghua's righteous methods, which cultivate the immortal path. In naturally occurring contexts, immortal qi may have nourishing or purifying properties, whereas malevolent qi (often refined via evil means such as murder) can poison an individual's mind or body.

Qiankun Pouch: A common item in wuxia and xianxia settings, a qiankun pouch contains an extradimensional space within it, to which its name (乾坤 / "universe") alludes. It is capable of holding far more than its physical exterior dimensions would suggest.

Qin: Traditional plucked stringed instrument in the zither family, usually played with the body placed flat on a low table. This was the favored instrument of scholars and the aristocracy.

Qinggong: Literally "lightness technique," qinggong (轻功) refers to the martial arts skill of moving swiftly and lightly through the air. In wuxia and xianxia settings, characters use qinggong to leap great distances and heights.

Seal Script: Ancient style of Chinese writing developed during the Qin dynasty, named for its usage in seals, engravings, and other inscriptions.

Shichen: Days were split into twelve intervals of two hours apiece called shichen (时辰 / "time"). Each of these shichen has an associated term. Prior to the Han dynasty, semi-descriptive terms were used. Post-Han

dynasty, the shichen were renamed to correspond to the twelve zodiac animals.

Hour of Zi, midnight: 11 p.m.–1 a.m.

Hour of Chou: 1–3 a.m.

Hour of Yin: 3–5 a.m.

Hour of Mao, sunrise: 5–7 a.m.

Hour of Chen: 7–9 a.m.

Hour of Si: 9–11 a.m.

Hour of Wu, noon: 11 a.m.–1 p.m.

Hour of Wei: 1–3 p.m.

Hour of Shen: 3–5 p.m.

Hour of You, sunset: 5–7 p.m.

Hour of Xu, dusk: 7–9 p.m.

Hour of Hai: 9–11 p.m.

Souls: According to Chinese philosophy and religion, every human had three ethereal souls (hun / 魂) which would leave the body after death, and seven corporeal souls (po / 魄) that remained with the corpse. Each soul governed different aspects of a person's being, ranging from consciousness and memory, to physical function and sensation.

Spiritual Core: A spiritual core (灵核 / linghe) is the foundation of a cultivator's power. It is typically formed only after ten years of hard work and study. If broken or damaged, the cultivator's abilities are compromised or even destroyed.

Suona: A traditional Chinese double-reeded wind instrument with a distinct and high-pitched sound, most often used for celebrations of the

living and the dead (such as weddings and funerals). Said to herald either great joy or devastating grief.

Sword glare: Jianguang (劍光 / “sword light”), an energy attack released from a sword’s edge, often seen in xianxia stories.

A Tale of Nanke: An opera by Tang Xianzu that details a dream had by disillusioned official Chunyu Fen, highlighting the ephemerality of the mortal world and the illusory nature of wealth and grandeur.

Talismans: Strips of paper with written incantations, often in cinnabar ink or blood. They can serve as seals or be used as one-time spells.

Three Disciplines and Three Poisons: Also known as the threefold training in Buddhist traditions, the three disciplines are virtue, mind, and wisdom. Conversely, the three poisons (also known as the three defilements) refer to the three Buddhist roots of suffering: greed, wrath, ignorance.

Wangshu: In Chinese mythology, Wangshu (望舒) is a lunar goddess often used in literary reference to the moon.

Xihe: In Chinese mythology, Xihe (羲和) is a solar goddess often used in literary reference to the sun.

Xun: A traditional Chinese vessel flute similar to the ocarina, often made of clay.

Yin Energy and Yang Energy: Yin and yang is a concept in Chinese philosophy which describes the complementary interdependence of

opposite/contrary forces. It can be applied to all forms of change and differences. Yang represents the sun, masculinity, and the living, while yin represents the shadows, femininity, and the dead, including spirits and ghosts. In fiction, imbalances between yin and yang energy may do serious harm to the body or act as the driving force for malevolent spirits seeking to replenish themselves of whichever energy they lack.

Ziwei Star: A star known to Western astronomers as the North Star or Polaris. As the other stars seemed to revolve around it, the Ziwei Star is considered the celestial equivalent of the emperor. Its stationary position in the sky makes it key to Zi Wei Dou Shu, the form of astrology that the ancient Chinese used to divine mortal destinies.

Zi Wei Dou Shu Divination: Zi Wei Dou Shu (紫微斗数/ “purple star astrology”) is a common system of astrology in Chinese culture, which predicts one’s fortune by plotting the position of certain stars at the time of one’s birth. The presence of stars in certain “palaces,” or sections of the sky, indicates either an auspicious or inauspicious destiny with regard to different aspects of one’s life. Zi Wei, also known as Polaris, the North Star, is a primary star that represents the emperor or leadership.

The Emperor Reborn and His Dearest Enemy
Cruel tyrant Taxian-jun killed his way to the throne and now reigns as the first ever emperor of the mortal realm. Yet somehow, he is unsatisfied. Left cold and bereft, abandoned by all he held dear, he takes his own life…only to be reborn anew.
Awakening in the body of his younger self—Mo Ran, a disciple of the cultivation sect Sisheng Peak—he discovers the chance to relive his life. This time, he vows to attain the gratification that once eluded him: all who defied him will fall, and never again will they treat him like a dog. His greatest fury is reserved for Chu Wanning, the coldly beautiful and aloofly catlike cultivation teacher who betrayed and thwarted Mo Ran time and again in their last life.
Yet as Mo Ran shamelessly pursues his own goals in this life he thought lost, he begins to wonder if there might be more to his teacher—and his own feelings—than he ever realized.
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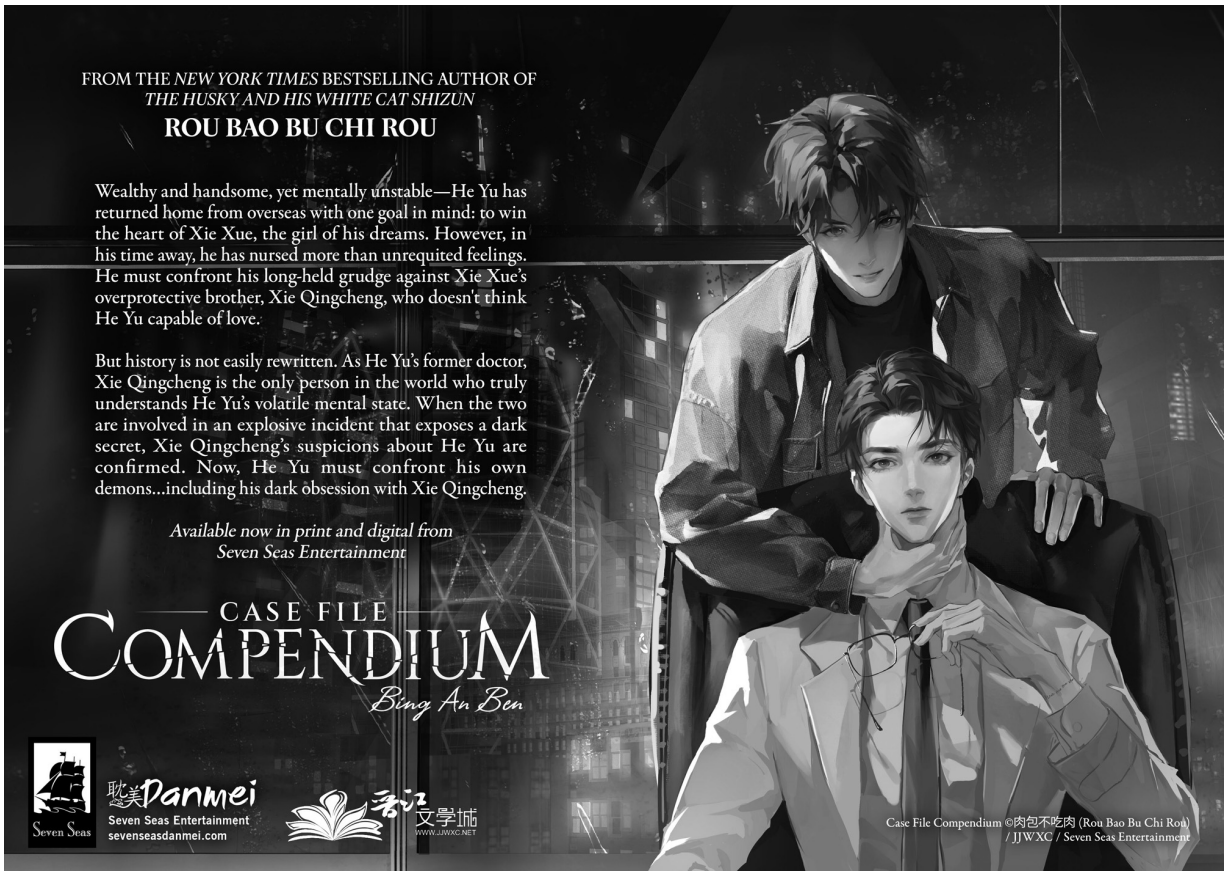
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Footnotes

Chapter 190: Before the Flower Broke the Darkness

[1] A form of fortunetelling based on sixty-four hexagrams defined in the Book of Changes. A hexagram is six lines, each of which can be yin or yang. Divination usually involves tossing yarrow stalks or coins.

Chapter Two

[2] Mei or meimei, a term of address for a younger sister or a younger female friend.

[3] Older martial sister, used for older disciples or classmates.

Chapter Three

[4] Younger martial sister, used for younger disciples or classmates.

Chapter Eight

[5] From the poem “To the Tune of Partridge Sky: The Jackdaw Mourns at Dusk” by Southern Song dynasty poet Xin Qiji.

[6] From the poem “Ode to My Wife” by the Han dynasty statesman Su Wu.

Chapter Fifteen

[7] An affectionate suffix meaning “son” or “child.”

Chapter Sixteen

[8] From the poem “Pavilion Night” by Du Fu, mourning scenes witnessed of battle.

Chapter Eighteen

[9] From “Qixi Poem” by Yu Jianwu.

Homecoming
In the aftermath of Gu Mang's defeat of the Demonblood Beast, Mo Xi rallies Chonghua's troops to face the Liao Kingdom. But there is little hope for victory. The blood pool left by the beast's death draws ever closer to the city walls, and the wicked Hua Po'an appears unstoppable. Just as all seems lost, the enigmatic Jiang Fuli reappears with an astonishing magical item—an ancient artifact with the ability to alter the past.
Mo Xi is presented with one last chance to avert Chonghua's tragic future and save everyone he's lost, though the cost to himself could be unimaginable. He is faced with a choice: How much more can he sacrifice for his beloved, and for the nation they both call home?
The stunning finale to Remnants of Filth contains a bonus novella and an exclusive new afterword by Rou Bao Bu Chi Rou.
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